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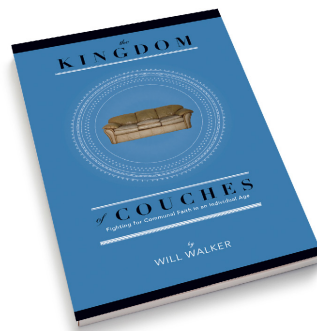
CONFESSING SIN TO ONE ANOTHER

KINGDOM OF COUCHES • CHAPTER EXCERPT

Community is not simply another ministry activity; it is the context for all ministry activities. It is the environment in which spiritual growth takes place. And since community is central to our model for spiritual growth, a few planned socials are not going to get the job done. We needed a resource to elevate community, encourage it, and teach it.

Will Walker's book is probably the best apologetic written for why community is the matrix for spiritual growth. But the content goes well beyond theological reasoning, providing extremely practical how's and why's for living out our faith in community. Through excellent writing and reasoning, personal examples and stories, the book creates a hunger and desire for communal living.

Content of Book: Why We Pursue Independence; Why We Need Community; Repentance; Community and the Word-Communal Quiet Times, Community and Confession; Group Prayer; Godly Speech and Conversation, and A Commitment to Live Communally.



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*ugly friends***CONFESSION**

I slept in this morning, got up to check my e-mail, made some oatmeal and a perfect pot of French-Pressed coffee. For me this is how a good day begins. When I finally sat down to do some work, Debbie came in the office and said she was having compatibility issues. I knew she wasn't talking about anything related to technology. Deathblow. That discussion landed on my heart like a ton of bricks. From there my morning spun out of control. So I made a list of stuff I needed to do. Organization gives us a sense of control. Of course, between the lines on the to-do list is the mess of not being able to get much of it done. Nothing can turn desires into duties faster than having too much to do. There is no way to get out of this day. It is overwhelmingly real: if I pretend that it is not as complex as it is, or look for medication to ease the pain, I will cease to exist in reality. My friend David says, "Reality is your friend." My other friend Jeremy says, "And sometimes your friend is ugly."

We are children of the Fall, and we breathe the air of sin. It is reality, our multifaceted reality. We love it and hate it, and hate that we love it. We readily admit that we are sinners, but try to hide specific sins. Sin, personified, has been with us longer than anyone else in our life. We literally don't know how to live without it, can't even imagine it. It never stops either. We may over-

come something, only for it to sneak up on us again. I don't think sin cares how it gets you, just as long as it gets you. That's why we all have various struggles in varying degrees. Within my group of friends, for instance, the thing that each of us fights against the most is different from person to person. Here's a rundown of what each of us struggles with the most. I'll start with Bob:

See, you want to know don't you. It never stops I'm telling you. I was talking to Brett recently about my battle with valuing myself based on the approval I feel from others, and I realized that I have made a good deal of progress in this area. I never really did anything to make progress, per se. Mostly I just started talking about it, telling people that I am an approval addict and confessing when I say or do something specifically just to make people think I am something that I'm not. Merely talking about sin has helped me not sin.

If we were houses I'd say that we should be really old houses, because older houses breathe. The construction isn't as tight, so air is allowed to pass through. It's not good for the electric bill, but it keeps mold from growing. Many newer homes are having mold problems because dark and isolated places can't breathe. People suffer from headaches and asthma from the mold. I read somewhere that some strands of mold even cause brain damage and cancer. You can read nearly anything somewhere.

Sin is like mold. If you isolate it, it spreads. People smell it or feel the consequences of it before they see it. By then it's too late. The damage is done. It's going to cost a lot to clean up the mess, if it's even possible.

Sin is a dominant topic of conversation in my communities. For starters we have a lot to talk about in this area. Beyond that we just believe we have to let the air pass through our lives, that others need to meet our ugly friends. When we conceal or neglect sin, we only learn and grow in theory, not in our actual lives. We may continue reading the Bible and having conversations, but all the while the real us is isolated from those activities. This is the

nature of hypocrisy. An honest dialogue about sin in general, and ours specifically, enables a community to ground itself in reality.

ONCE CONCEIVED

I sin, which you know all too well by know, but I rarely say it. Sure, I admit that I sin because we are all sinners, blah blah blah. But it's more than that. My sin is tangible. It hurts people, people that I care about. I withhold good things from people. I blight the image of God. I'm not talking about the kind of hangnail sins we confess to each other these days. I'm trying to say that my sin, even more than I suspect, is the kind of gaping wound that makes you nauseous to look at.

Sometimes I find myself in the middle of lust or gossip or laziness, buying stuff to feel better or craving the approval of others, and I know it is wrong, wrong like vandalism and deception. Yet the urges that drive it, or at least the habits that perpetuate it, keep pushing. They push so obstinately that I feel I've passed the point of no return, as if I'm obligated to it. In that moment I think it is just easier to stay the course, easier to satisfy the urge than to kill it. There is a certain kind of relief in giving up. At least it's over. It's over. I can think clearly now. I confess it to God.

I don't always confess it. Sometimes I dismiss it as small, justify it, or lose it in the blur of the next activity. Sometimes I clean the kitchen or watch TV. Eventually I forget about it. What's in the past is in the past. I'm finished with it.

But it is not finished with me. When gratified, sinful desire subsides, but it always comes back in familiar and mutated forms, strengthened by precedent. My heart gets harder and more disposed to the sin. Thus the sorrow of prevailing indulgence.

It's perplexing. In some ways I am growing and maturing and becoming who I think God wants me to be. Simultaneously sin is progressing and spreading in me like cancer. It is somehow subtle and ferocious, a homicidal lull. Each singular act of sin is part of

the scheme to harden me, to medicate the pain of cosmic adultery, to sing me quietly to sleep. I don't think enough about the real horror of what it means to sin, that I conceive with my sinful desires a lethal organism that is unleashed into the world around me, perpetuating pain and deception, working to undermine the activity of God among us. I do not consider the long-term effect on my soul, that I am becoming a slave to what I hate.

David posed a question on the blog along these lines. He asked, "What if I knew that for every bowl of ice cream I enjoyed I would lose one percent of my vision?" If you don't love ice cream, then substitute something else: favorite food, watching sports, sex, whatever. David said his initial response would be to swear off ice cream completely—vision is way too important to throw away on a short-lived pleasure. But then he went on to say:

I suspect after awhile I would wonder if it were really true—does ice cream really cause me to lose vision, or did someone make that up to keep me from getting fat? Eventually I would try it out. I would eat some ice cream and then look at some words to see if they were blurry. I'm guessing I would see just fine—one percent wouldn't make that much difference. But just to be safe, I would only have ice cream once a month. After a year of ice cream that amounted to a twelve percent loss in vision, I think I would notice a difference. In a blurry street sign, I would see some consequences of my indulgence. The eye doctor would change my prescription, and I would have to get new glasses. And then I would see clearly again. In seeing clearly again I wonder if I would be tempted to eat just a little ice cream, since the consequences appear manageable. In fact, eating just a little ice cream would still leave me many years before losing my eyesight completely. Stronger pre-

scriptions, laser eye surgery. I'm adaptable; I think I could still make life work.

Sometimes I wonder if little acts of sin smudge the window of my soul. I confess, ask for God's cleansing and all, but while I'm confident of restored fellowship with God, I wonder if I've lost something I can't fully recover.

My mind will let me do all kinds of things that my heart won't. As long as sin is an issue of right and wrong, in the sense of rules and such, I will be able to justify it or somehow consider particular sins to be worth it. If adultery were merely a rule, for example, I might be able to break it on a bad day. But as it is I would never even consider adultery, rules or no rules, God or no God, because I cannot bear to think of the pain it would cause Debbie and Ethan, both of whom I love. That is what I mean when I say my heart will not let me do what my mind would otherwise permit. If I am going to consider my particular sins to be "not worth it," I must view sin as cosmic adultery and sibling betrayal. My sin is not just about me. It is a family affair. Bob said it this way:

The suggestion that my sin is best dealt with between me and God is problematic. This point of view sees community as nonessential to sanctification. It treats the Body of Christ as a gathering of the healed, not a fellowship of the broken. It suggests that sin can be conquered by introspection and personal struggle. These notions are not biblical. But they are a natural side effect of the individualistic "me and Jesus" gospel that we've been preaching for the last few decades. Jesus always intends my sin to be dealt with in community. To say, "It's my sin; I need to deal with it," is to suggest that God will give me the end (victory over sin) apart from the means (gospel-cen-

tered community). *Au contraire*: “Confess your sins to each other, and pray for each other, so that you may be healed.”¹

ON THE TABLE

I have strong teeth. I don't floss or make enough circles with my toothbrush, but last time I went to the dentist he said my teeth look great. He says that every time. Even so the hygienist always asks me if I floss. I knew it was coming, and I debated with myself about whether or not to lie. She would know if I were lying, I thought so I told her, “No, not really.” She pushed, “Why not?” I hadn't planned on giving a defense, so I told her the truth again, “I guess there haven't been any consequences to motivate me yet.” She said, “Well, do you exercise?” “Yes,” I said. “Okay, then just floss every time you exercise.” That plan would work if I hadn't lied about exercising.

Confession is one of those things that you are supposed to do, like flossing and aerobic exercise. People say it keeps the lines clear between you and God. But in the past week, how many times have you confessed your sin, not that you are a sinner in general, but an acknowledgment of a particular sin: 0-5, 5-10, 10-20, 50+? This is not a test of spiritual maturity, just a look at your reality. Now, how many times in the last week do you think you did or thought or said something that merited confession: 0-10, 10-20, 50+? Most people score higher on the second question than the first. I score much higher. What does it say about you? I've been asking these questions to a number of people lately, and so far a few conclusions have come to the surface.

First of all the people I have been asking are quite capable of defining confession in an evangelical sense and would say all the right things concerning what they “believe” about confession.

¹ See James 5:16

One reason for this hypocrisy could be that we are simply unaware of our sin—too busy, too preoccupied, too ADD, whatever. The bottom line is that we are not in tune with ourselves—what we think and say and do. We know we sin. We just don't know much about how we sin, exactly. Another proposed reason was that we don't understand sin very well—that it is cosmic adultery and that a life of duplicity is death to our soul. We take it lightly. Finally, there is also a sense that some people just don't want to talk about it. Either they cannot bear the shame of it or they just want to keep it quiet until they can manage to overcome it. Some simply do not want to give it up. In the first case they misunderstand grace, and in the second they abuse it.

These observations are not independent of each other. Not understanding sin certainly lends itself to taking it lightly and so on. Delineating and listing them just helps me think more clearly about all this. After I asked one group of people about how often they confess sin, and about the discrepancy, we looked at this passage in 1 John:

This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.²

The thing that sticks out to me is the fact that Jesus cleanses us from sin while we are in the light, which implies that we have sin while we are in the light. How does that work? How can we be

² 1 John 1:5-8, NIV

in the light and yet have sin? I have always assumed that walking in the light means having some sort of sinless purity about me. I mean, John says that God is light. But then he says that if I say I have attained this sinless purity, I am a liar. It's a tough spot. The conclusion we came to in our discussions was that "light" is better interpreted as "truth" or "honesty." God is up front, totally honest. He doesn't shade things or neglect our relationship. Fellowship with God and with each other means we reciprocate this kind of honesty. When my four-year-old sins, even if I know what he did, we are at a relational stalemate until he is willing to talk about it with me.

Confession is not a spiritual additive, something we can get by without. It is the kind of honesty and truth that makes relationship possible. Jesus is willing and able to cleanse us and restore our relationships if we will just get our sin—the real us—in the light. If we do not talk about our sin, then we are liars in our actual lives regardless of what we know or say.

BREAKING NEWS

I have not said that this passage is solely about confessing our sin to God. Most people probably think of it that way, but this is yet another area where we confuse personal and private. Notice that "if we walk in the light as he Himself is in the light we have fellowship with one another." In fact, every mention of confession in the New Testament is public in nature. Here's the list if you are curious:

1. "Many of those who believed now came and openly confessed their evil deeds" (Acts 19:18).
2. "People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River" (Matthew 3:5-6).

3. “Confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).
4. “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8).

The English word “confess” appears elsewhere in the New Testament, but in other places it refers to the idea of giving testimony: confessing that Jesus is the Son of God. Even those references are public as well.

Songwriter Derek Webb once suggested to an audience that the best thing that could happen to them was for their sin to be broadcast on the evening news.³ I thought that sounded like a cool thing to say. I have said it to people several times since then, and it is definitely a cool thing to say. It is not very cool to believe though. I hate the thought of my sin being broadcast anywhere.

I was talking with some fraternity guys about grace recently. They like the idea of grace, because they are pretty sure they need some. We have been talking all semester about how we can become the kind of people who want what God wants. This conversation makes us feel helpless sometimes, so that is why we were talking about grace. So far we have decided that it is difficult to make yourself want something that you don’t want. That is why we sin, because at least in that moment, we want to.

One day we were talking about how people in love do stuff they never would have imagined doing. For example, a guy we all know went to the mall recently to get something for his girlfriend. On top of that he went to a store where, apparently, you build your own teddy bear. Somehow he talked a friend into going with him. So there they were, two guys trying to maintain coolness while assembling a teddy bear together. If those guys could do that, we

³ Derek Webb, “I Repent,” *The House Show*.

conceded that our wants could be changed if we were in love.

As we talked about the relationship between love and want, we discovered that it is difficult to intentionally fall in love, even with God. Thinking about Jesus, it seems like people loved Him because they had an encounter with Him in which they experienced His love for them. The question about how to want what God wants became: How can we experience God's love? So that is how we got to talking about grace. They said they believe in grace and that they are forgiven of their sin and unconditionally loved. But when the conversation turned to their actual life and what they believe about their particular sins, they were inconsistent. They received God's love like they received a paycheck. On a religious test they would say it is free and unconditional. But really they want to measure up, want to feel like they are plenty love-able. They want to keep their dignity.

I'm like that. Sometimes I act as if God and people will love me if I am worth loving. I was beginning to think that none of us experienced God's love the way we could. That's when Derek Webb's question came to mind. I asked the guys how they would feel about all their sin being published on the front page of *The Daily Texan*. Everything they thought and said and felt and did from the previous day—all of it published each day in the school newspaper. "Would you like that?" I asked. "No we would not," they replied. Then they looked at me like I was an idiot for asking.

I inquired, "Why not?"

"What do you mean, 'why not'? The same reason you don't want to get hit in the face? It just doesn't feel good."

"Okay. I understand that. But could there be anything good about it?"

"No."

"Well, what wouldn't feel good, specifically?"

"Everyone would know that—"

(I interrupted) ... "That you're a s-s-s-sinner?"

"Yes."

“What’s wrong with that?”

“Well, I know that people know I sin, but I don’t necessarily want them to know exactly how I sin.”

“Yeah, but if everyone knew everything about you then you could stop pretending to be something you are not. What would you have left if you were totally exposed like that? You wouldn’t have your dignity. What would you have?”

One of them eventually spoke up, “I guess all I would have is God’s love.”

I pretended that was the answer I was looking for. I had no idea what I was looking for. But what that guy said was gold. If we try to hold on to our image or reputation or dignity, we are not likely to cling to God’s love. We end up falling in love with ourselves and not with God. And being in love with ourselves, we do whatever we can to make ourselves look good. Sin never gets in the light. No cleansing. No fellowship.

DAMAGED GOODS

My conversation with the frat guys was a fun theoretical exercise. But not long after that day, Bob encountered the theory in reality. He wrote about his “breaking news” experience in this post:

Today I sat down to talk with a dear friend who just resigned from a high-profile ministry position because of an adulterous affair. The conversation didn’t go as planned. I was expecting to console him, counsel him, challenge him, be there for him. (insert your favorite Christian cliché). Instead, I found the tables turned. He ministered to me.

I remembered Derek Webb’s statement: it would be great to have all of your sin broadcast on the evening

news. Then you would have nothing to hide, no mask to wear, no decency to protect. The news would be out, and you would be free to be you—a broken sinner covered by the grace of God. That’s where my friend is. The news is out; the sin is public; there’s no place to hide. He’s starting from ground zero, face-to-face with his own broken humanity. And he’s more real than I’ve ever seen him. I guess I was expecting to find a weepy guy, or an angry guy, or a confused guy, or a guy in identity crisis. What I found instead was a guy who is deeply experiencing the grace of God in a way I’m not sure I ever have.

Sure, he has a hard road ahead. He has a marriage to rebuild, some soul-scars to heal, a career to start over. It’s easy, in my mind, to look at a guy who’s had an affair and say, “Well, at least I’ve never been there.” But in a strange way, I found myself today wishing I had been there—*not* wishing that I’d had an affair, but wishing I really knew, experientially, the deep love of Christ poured out in my soul. To live every moment saturated in grace, knowing that I’ve had every pretense stripped away, and Jesus is still fond of me. To know that when I’ve failed miserably, Jesus accepts me. To know that even if I pissed away everything I’ve worked for—everything that’s valuable to me—Jesus loves me. I can say I know all that stuff, but let’s be honest: there’s knowing, and then there’s *knowing*.

Today I saw a guy who *knows* Jesus. According to our standard Christian stereotypes, he’s damaged goods—worthy to be cast into the outer darkness of Christianity. And yet I really think I am closer to Jesus tonight because of what I learned from him. If he weren’t such a dear friend, I think I’d actually be bugged by that. Maybe there’s more “older brother” in me than I’d

like to think. Why should the prodigals get to experience the Father's lavish grace so profoundly? Perhaps because they have nothing to hide.

BULLETS

The other side to all of this exposure is our response to what is exposed. We've all heard phrases like "it's not my place to judge" or, conversely, "it's not your place to judge me." Unfortunately, these sentiments reveal more about our obsession with individuality and privacy than they do about biblical relationships within the Body. In communities where we have identified ourselves as those who are following Christ together, we are bound to one another in love. That is we pursue the most loving course of action with those around us. And in the case of sin, our love compels us to get it on the table and work toward restoring fellowship with God and each other. The best example I can think of regarding this idea is in Paul's letter to the Galatians:

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently. But watch yourself, or you also may be tempted. Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else, for each one should carry his own load. Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor. Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for

at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.⁴

Paul strikes a powerful balance between personal responsibility for actions and corporate responsibility for restoration. Getting in people's personal business is generally frowned upon, so we shy away from talking about people's sin, which only serves to further isolate them. The goal of community in this regard is never to compare or condemn others, but always to assist each other in restoring fellowship with Jesus and His Body. Sin in our midst should cause us to rally together, not drift apart. Bob posted a story about an event in his community that illustrates this concept quite powerfully:

One of the interns who works for me has a brother who's a cop. He was shot yesterday. At first the reports were sketchy. Neighbors had heard gunshots, and witnesses said an officer had been hit. Last time an officer took a bullet in our city, it was fatal. He left behind a wife and three young kids. Maybe that explains why the whole community was on edge last night, waiting to hear news that my friend's brother was okay. The news channels were running live updates. The mayor made a personal visit to the hospital. Just about every cop in the city stopped by at some point to wish him well and show solidarity. The injuries are not life-threatening; he'll be okay. But the whole incident has got me thinking a lot. Mainly about community.

My friend said that all he had to do was say his last name in the parking lot and he instantly had a personal

⁴ Galatians 6:1-10, NIV

police escort right to his brother's bedside. He had cops giving him their personal cell phone numbers, offering "anything you need, man." It was like the whole police force was one big family, rallying in support of their fallen comrade.

Cops are just like the rest of us: I'm sure they don't always get along with each other. There are quarrels and office politics and personal agendas, just like anywhere. But when one of their guys goes down in the line of fire, something transcendent takes over. Personal quarrels don't matter anymore. Cops all wear the same uniform. There is a fierce loyalty to the cause—to Good and Justice and Freedom—that trumps everything else. I wonder if, in the family of God, our failures in community come because we are blind to the life-and-death struggle we are in. The enemy seems mythical, not real. The bullets aren't actually flying. Our souls aren't actually in danger of being devoured. Or are they?

Last weekend another friend of mine took a bullet from the enemy. He caught her in a moment of unguarded weakness. She compromised her convictions with a boy who met some needs, filled some gaps, medicated some wounds. She came to me and told me about it—I think because she trusts me. But if word got out among Christians she knows, she would be embarrassed and self-conscious. Why? Because we'd be more prone to throw her overboard than to offer our support and help and concern. I know she is a moral agent and responsible for her choices. I just think we tend to see people as basically physical beings and sin as little more than weakness. We don't give much thought to the enemy who's hell-bent on murdering us all.

When a cop takes a bullet, the assumption is that he was in the right place, doing his duty. He was taking

the enemy head-on. He was in the fight instead of on the sidelines. Shouldn't we make the same assumption when a Christian takes a bullet?

I took a trip to Pass Christian, Mississippi recently to help clean up the unthinkable mess caused by hurricane Katrina. You really can't imagine the devastation and loss. It seems like a hopeless cause, yet many of the residents are still there, cleaning up and rebuilding their houses. Even with all of the help from volunteers, it will take years to recover. I wonder if they would stay if nobody came to help them? Something else that struck me was how much I enjoyed being there. The grief of loss was secondary to the joy and enthusiasm of a bunch of people rallying together for a worthy cause. The way people rally around crisis really is amazing. I kept thinking about how all of us are in crisis, not because we lost our houses but because we lost our home. Why aren't we rallying around the crises of sin in our communities, helping each other restore the Kingdom?

PRACTICE COMMUNAL CONFESSION

The thing about broadcasting your sin was just to make a point. I do not think that we need to tell the world about all of our issues. To begin with, people are not really that interested. They have issues of their own to keep up with. But in the context of community—the people that you live life with—an open dialogue about struggle and desire and sin is imperative to growth and learning.

I am not talking about accountability groups, at least not the kind that I have experienced. I used to meet with my friend Jonathan in college for accountability. Ironically, he recently wrote an article about how he shudders when he thinks of the way we went about “helping” each other. He goes on to explain:

Although the aim of accountability groups is good,

the practice is often misguided. Accountability groups often smack of asceticism. Failures to trust and cherish God are punished through graduated penalties. Instead of holding one another accountable to trusting God, we become accountable for exacting punishments on one another. The unfortunate result is a kind of legalism in which the healing of confession and the power of God's promises are substituted by peer-prescribed punishments. Confession in such contexts is relegated to "keeping from doing it," making discipleship a duty-driven, rule-keeping journey. Alternatively, these sorts of groups often devolve into a kind of evangelical confessional booth in which I confess my sin, you confess yours; I pat your back, you pat mine; we pray and then depart absolved of any guilt. Confession becomes divorced from repentance, and accountability becomes a man-made mix of moralism and cheap peace.

The aim of confession is not so others can punish us or even fix us, and vice versa. We listen, we talk about relevant passages of Scripture, we reason from our experience, and we pray. Jesus does the cleansing. We just need to get it out in the light, on the table. As I said, I have found that merely talking about my struggles, especially when I commit specific acts of sin, helps me overcome them. The cleansing process is mysterious to me, but so is the gospel. I believe in both.

I HEAR VOICES

Debbie and I were on a mission project last summer. There were about thirty of us, everyone professional Christians, and funk was in the air. I didn't notice it, but my friend Adam is very perceptive about these things. He could sense immaturity, selfishness, fear—all kinds of things that ruin community. So one morning

during a meeting Adam asked, “How many of you believe in spiritual warfare?” He had us talk about how we think the enemy attacks people, and we read a few passages. Then he said, “I think the enemy speaks to us. He speaks lies into our minds and often we believe them. It is all very subtle, but it affects how we think and act.” Then he had each of us pray and write down what we were believing that was a lie, or even just things we were thinking that affected our thoughts and attitudes in negative ways. It’s amazing how many things come to mind along these lines when you take time to think about it. After ten minutes or so, Adam dropped the bomb on us: “Now we are going to go around the circle and I want you to read out loud whatever you wrote down.” I’m pretty sure someone wet their pants right then and there.

But we did it. It was crazy. People said things like, “I am not good enough to be here” and “I do not deserve to marry this person” and “Will doesn’t like me.” No kidding, someone really said that. Someone I liked very much in fact. It took awhile to get around the circle on account of everyone crying and apologizing. I remember feeling so sad at first, and then even more angry than sad. I was enraged that we would all believe such crap, that the enemy could so easily rob us of Trinitarian community. Adam was literally turning red in the face with rage. He started yelling out, “That’s not true! That’s not true!” Collectively our sadness and anger moved us to pray for one another. It was just like James said: “Confess your sins to each other and *pray* for each other so that you may be healed.”⁵

I did this exercise with my coworkers at UT. We talked about how we all believe lies about others, our circumstances, and ourselves. I asked them to write down what they hear “the voices” telling them. It’s very important that you don’t tell people that you are going to read the cards out loud, because they will not be honest with what they write if you tell them. I realize that is

⁵ James 5:16, NIV

manipulative, but they do not have to read anything they are absolutely not comfortable reading. Otherwise, we all need a push in the right direction every now and then. People cried this time, too. It was incredibly insightful and meaningful to all of us. And since then all we have to say to each other is, “Hey, what have the voices been saying lately?” or “Hey, I’ve been hearing some voices about something, and I don’t know if it’s true, but I thought we could get it out on the table.” The exercise has made it easier for us to talk about our struggles in the course of our day-to-day interactions.

Bob did the voices exercise with the leadership group at his church. He said it was one of the most amazing experiences they had ever had together. We’re three for three with this thing. You should give it a try with your friends.

Talking about the voices is not exactly the same as confessing sin, but it is a way of practicing confession that will help you talk about difficult things and experience the kind of grace and healing that you should associate with communal confession.

A CONFSSIONAL LIFE

Confession is no different than Bible reading in that we don’t always need to do it communally. In fact, most of what I confess I do so silently to God. Sin is always a reminder of how we blight the image of God, so He is the first person I want to talk to about my sin. When I do share my thoughts and failures with others, it is either because I have sinned against them, or because I need their help in the midst of my struggle. The point is not that communal confession is better than private confession, but that we need to practice both. We need to do whatever we can to let the air pass through, even if it means being seen with our ugly friends.