

The Church's Care for the Penitent: Some Considerations

By Joseph E. Rolison

How is the visible church to minister to her members who, although truly repentant for their sin, struggle to appropriate God's forgiveness in Christ to themselves? Perhaps they have committed grievous sin and been led to repentance by the Holy Spirit—yet they still labor under a troubled conscience. Or perhaps they have not committed grievous sin but, as the English preacher Charles Spurgeon observed, have matured in Christ such that they say of themselves, “The nearer we are to heaven in point of sanctification, the more we mourn our infirmities, and the humbler is our estimate of ourselves.... The more grace, the more need of grace is felt.”¹

This article addresses that question exegetically, theologically and pastorally. Exegetically, we will explore a portion of Psalm 51—David's great confession of sin following his adultery with Bathsheba and arrangement to have her husband, Uriah, killed—giving special attention to his grief for sin and to its effect on his soul (and consequently on his worship of God). We then will look within Psalm 51 to suggest one God-ordained, public means for soothing the troubled conscience of the repentant believer: the sacraments. This paper then explores two other, less-emphasized means of re-assurance that are not found in Psalm 51, but which merit deeper consideration by the church: the assurance of pardon from Scripture in corporate services of worship, and the restoration of the believer following church disciplinary proceedings. This study contends that the ministry of the visible church can, and should, encourage repentant Christians, who at times might find it difficult to embrace the reality of their forgiveness in the Savior and, in turn, to worship Him robustly.

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DAVID'S PROFOUND GRIEF FOR SIN AND ITS EFFECT ON WORSHIP

Through the centuries, the psalter has figured prominently in the life and in the worship of the church. From the Old Covenant era to the present, the people of God have read, sung and prayed the psalms as a divinely inspired songbook. Psalm singing and recitation endure in many of the Reformed churches, occupying a significant and cherished place in private, family, and corporate worship. Given their rich diversity the psalms are, in the felicitous description of the Reformer John Calvin, “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul,”² which explains in part why Christians have incorporated them consistently and fruitfully into worship public and private.

Within the psalter, Psalm 51 has served as a standard confession of sin for believers. The 19th-century Presbyterian commentator William Plumer remarked that “this psalm is often and fitly called ‘The Sinner's Guide.’ In some of its versions it often helps the returning sinner.”³ Plumer then refers to St. Athanasius, who in the 4th century AD wrote in his *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*, “Suppose now that you have sinned and, having been put to confusion, are repenting and begging for forgiveness, then you have the words of confession and repentance in Psalm

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1. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, “Ripe Fruit,” in *The Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit* (Pasadena, TX: Pilgrim Publications, 1970), 16:446–447.

2. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), xxxvii.

3. William S. Plumer, *Studies in the Book of Psalms* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, 1872), 555.

50 (51).⁴ There can be little doubt of its value to and pervasive use by the covenant community, not only for prayer and in worship, but also for instruction.⁵

Psalms 51 features a trove of instruction in various theological *loci*, including theology proper, anthropology and hamartiology.⁶ For example, this psalm clearly informs the reader about the sinfulness of the human being and his preeminent need of mercy from the Lord (see vv 4-5). The psalm, in fact, begins with a plea for God's undeserved favor. That this sort of petition occurs at the very outset of the psalm indicates that it forms a major thrust of the passage and suggests that David's awareness of guilt will resurface throughout the text.⁷ David is in need of God's kind dealings in light of his crafty and ultimately murderous plot against Uriah and adulterous liaison with Bathsheba, and he is unabashed in expressing that need. Moreover, the usage of three different but complementary words for "sin" in the first

three verses of the psalm suggests that David perceives the breadth of his wrongdoing and is no longer seeking to minimize it.⁸

David's conviction for sin in Psalm 51 is more remarkable given there was a time during which he refused to confess it. In fact, this prayer marks a significant change in the state of his conscience. Before Nathan the prophet confronted David and the Lord granted him repentance, David's conscience actually appeared hardened to his sin. Psalm 32:3-4 speaks of a period following this series of events in which David refused to confess his transgression to the Lord ("when I kept silence") and languished under divine displeasure.⁹ Moreover, his words to Joab in 2 Sam 11:25, coupled with his apparently matter-of-fact taking of Bathsheba to be his wife, reflect a callousness to the evils he has committed.

Such is no longer the case by the time David composes Psalm 51. David seems to grasp the enormity of his sin not only in its various characterizations ("missing the mark," "perversion," "transgression"), but also in its reverberating effect on his soul. In v 3 David observes that his sin is "ever conspicuous to (him)," or "before (him)." David says he "is knowing" his transgressions, thus acknowledging and owning those sins. He now seems to have a constant consciousness of, and remorse before God for, his wrongdoing. Such a personal awareness of the magnitude of one's sin is necessary for true confession and forgiveness to take place, and in this sense it is a good thing for David to be afflicted before God. But David likely intends more than merely an honest admission of guilt to the Lord when he says, "My sin is ever before me." He also has in view an ongoing cognizance of his sin, leading to anguish of the soul.¹⁰

For the purposes of this article, we will focus on verses 3 and 7-15, for they offer another, critical lesson for the church from this "Sinner's Guide": genuine conviction of sin—especially (but not exclusively) sins that are grievous—brings with it a profound and enduring sense of grief for one's wrongdoing. One effect of this grief is that the penitent might be slow to embrace the forgiveness of God and therefore reticent to open his mouth in praise to God. As Derek Kidner observes, David's prayer is "no mere formula but the cry of one whose conscience has shamed him into silence."¹¹ To be sure, conviction of sin (as mentioned above) is a blessing from the Lord. This is a model prayer for corporate worship, because the reader observes in David precisely the sort of penitent spirit that eventually leads to acceptable worship of the Lord.¹² But David's desire

4. Athanasius, *Letter to Marcellinus on the Interpretation of the Psalms*. (<http://www.athanasius.com/psalms/aletterm.htm>; accessed 19 March 2015).

5. Matthew Henry, the prominent Reformed commentator of the 17th and 18th centuries, makes this general remark on Psalm 51: "Though David penned this psalm upon a very particular occasion, yet, it is of as general use as any of David's psalms; it is the most eminent of the penitential psalms, and most expressive of the cares and desires of a repenting sinner. . . . Those whose consciences charge them with any gross sin should, with a believing regard to Jesus Christ, the Mediator, again and again pray over this psalm; nay, though we have not been guilty of adultery and murder, or any the like enormous crime, yet in singing it, and praying over it, we may very sensibly apply it all to ourselves, which if we do with suitable affections we shall, through Christ, find mercy to pardon and grace for seasonable help. . . . He drew up, by divine inspiration, the workings of his heart towards God, upon this occasion, into a psalm, that it might be often repeated, and long after reviewed; and this he committed to the chief musician, to be sung in the public service of the church." Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry's Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991), 3:350–351.

6. Hamartiology is the study of the doctrine of sin, deriving from a combination of the Greek words *hamartia* ("sin," "offense") and *logos* ("word").

7. See Willem VanGemeren, *Psalms* (Expositor's Bible Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991), 379.

8. Marvin Tate, *Psalms* (WBC 20; Waco: Word, 1991), 15–17.

9. "He indicates that there had been a season of impenitence. Man is naturally reluctant to admit sin, especially in situations like those of David, who had enjoyed a reputation for unsullied character in the eyes of the whole nation so many years." Herbert Carl Leupold, *Exposition of the Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1969), 267.

10. "This expression certainly conveys a sense of continual awareness rather than an occasional consciousness and most probably also the idea of continuing tension because of fear and shame." Tate, *Psalms*, 17.

11. Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72* (TOTC; London: InterVarsity Fellowship, 1973), 193.

12. See the commendation of a "crushed" spirit in v 17.

for himself in this psalm and God's design for His forgiven people is that joy would be restored through the reality and assurance of divine pardon, leading to the renewed praise of the God who saves.

Again, as evident in v 3, the now-penitent king has the specter of his transgressions perpetually before him. Verses 8, 10-12 and 14-15 reveal something of the condition of David's soul at this point, as we shall investigate in greater detail below. But it is clear that David's keen awareness of sin, which prompts him to ask for the Lord's forgiveness several times throughout the psalm, prevents him from "hear(ing) joy and gladness" and from "rejoic(ing)" (v 8). Calvin remarks, "His recurring so often to petitions for pardon, proves how far David was from flattering himself with unfounded hopes, and what a severe struggle he sustained with inward terrors."¹³

In verse 7, David pleads for the Lord's forgiveness for the third time in the psalm, underscoring his earnestness in the pursuit of God's mercy. The frequency with which he asks for forgiveness (here, "purge me," "wash me") betrays David's deep remorse for his sin.¹⁴ If the Lord in fact would clear David and purge him from his sin, he knew he would be clean indeed: the almost-exaggerated language of being "whiter than snow" stretches the mind and shows how intensely David wanted the forgiveness that comes only from the true Judge. Given his interior wrestling with original sin and the reality of his actual sin, it is not surprising that in v 8 David asks the Lord to cause him to hear (שמעו) joy and gladness. Probably his ears still rang with Nathan's arresting words: "Thou art the man!" If he were to hear true joy, David could not shut his ears to the truth of his evil-doing, nor would it avail for him to surround himself with flatterers (see the psalmist's own words in Psa 36:2). Only the Lord Himself could speak true peace and comfort to David's disturbed soul, because forgiveness "belongs to the Lord" (Dan 9:9). In praying to "hear joy and gladness," David certainly has more in view than the mere auditory experience of hearing songs of praise being sung, or of tunes being played on instruments. It is better to understand "hear" as "perceive with the ear *and* with the heart." But how can the Lord cause David to hear joy and gladness? We will suggest answers to that question in the last section of this article. For now, note that he describes himself spiritually as having "crushed" bones—by God's doing.

David continues in vv 9-12 to bare his soul to the Lord (and to the reader), recognizing that he has dishonored the Lord and provoked His displeasure. David repeats his plea for forgiveness from the Lord in v 9, again in

deeply personal terms ("hide *your* face from *my* sins, and blot out all *my* iniquities"). Curiously, although the reader might have expected David to move beyond the place of begging for God's mercy, he purposefully does not. He would have his audience understand the severity and heaviness of sin before the Lord: hence it is no light matter that can be confessed quickly and summarily dismissed from his, or from any true penitent's, mind.¹⁵

Following this petition for forgiveness, David in v 10 prays to the Lord to purify his heart in a sanctifying manner. This request advances the prayer in that it expresses dependence on the Lord to establish David's spirit in steadfastness. The reader should not infer that the request to "create" in David a clean heart suggests that his heart never had been purified by God previously. This is not *creatio ex nihilo*.¹⁶ That King David asks the Lord to "renew" an "upright" spirit within him indicates that the psalmist already enjoys a saving relationship with God. Yet this saving relationship, although certain to endure for all eternity (John 10:28-29), has been strained by the king's transgressions. David—as would any sincerely repentant believer after so great a sin (see Westminster Confession of Faith 17.4; hereafter WCF)—perceives his own frailty and indwelling sin and refuses to rely upon his own power for growth in godliness. His solution is to ask God to confirm his heart in the ways of holy obedience.

Evidently concerned that the Lord would withdraw His presence because of the enormity of these sins, in v 11 David prays that God would not remove His Holy Spirit from him. David's experience of diminished intimacy with God in the aftermath of these events drives him again to ask the Lord not to "fling" David from His face (presence). David has experienced what the WCF acknowledges: true believers may sin greatly and, by those sins, "come to be deprived of some measure of their graces and comforts" (17.3). David's plea in this verse illustrates the foundation-shaking effect that egregious sin often has on the heart of the erring brother or sister.

When the believer senses distance between himself and God on account of sin, he many times experiences a concomitant loss of joy. No doubt this absence of joy results from his estrangement from God, for as David asserts in Psa 16:11, "In Thy presence is fulness of joy; at Thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore." His

13. Calvin, *Psalms*, 302.

14. David Dickson, *A Commentary on the Psalms* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1959), 1:309.

15. See Leupold, *Psalms*, 266 for his relevant comments on Psa 32:2.

16. Tate, *Psalms*, 23.

request in 51:12 that the Lord “re \dot{t} ore” (הִשְׁׁיבֵנוּ) joy to him makes for an interesting play on words with v 13,¹⁷ in which David promises that if the Lord returns to him the joy of salvation, he will in turn teach transgressors the ways of God so that *they* might be returned, or restored, to God. To that end, David asks the Lord to support him by a “willing \dot{s} pirit.” Whose \dot{s} pirit is in view? In the preceding verse David has begged the Lord not to take from him His Holy Spirit, after having admitted his need for God to renew a steadfast and unwavering \dot{s} pirit within him. Contextually, therefore, it seems appropriate to take the reference in v 12 to the Spirit of God.¹⁸

David’s prayer courses along, shaped in this segment by the concept of “turning”: as the Lord returns joy to David, whom He has turned from his sin and from the suppression of it (cf. *Psa* 32:3), David in turn will be encouraged to teach (fellow) sinners the way of God (v 13). Through David’s ministering of the Word, they too will “return” to God—surely because He first turns them to Himself. Essential to this ministry, however, is that the Lord first return joy and gladness to David, whose sin has eroded his joy.

The king still has not forgotten the severity of his sin, though, and in v 14 we begin to perceive more pointedly the weighty impact it has on his worship of God. In v 14 he revisits the seriousness of his wrongdoing by asking that the “God of his salvation” would deliver him from blood-guiltiness—or, perhaps better, “bloods.” By this construction David most likely suggests that his sin, as does all sin, deserves eternal death at the hands of the holy One of Israel and, therefore, is no light matter that the sinner may dispatch quickly.¹⁹ Such an understanding of David’s words at this point casts a somber light on the passage; but only against so serious a backdrop can we appreciate his promise to praise God in song in vv 14b and 15. Frequently—though by no means exclusively—in the psalter, singing is associated with joy, especially following God’s deliverance of His people and their resultant worship of Him (cf. *Psa* 98:1-3). *Psa* 30:4

and 47:6, among numerous other texts, indicate that the Lord actually commands His church to extol him in song. But David continues to wrestle with the memory and awfulness of his transgressions, and his worship of God is stifled as a result. Unless the Lord delivers him from the \dot{s} piritual consequences of his lawlessness *and* from the persistent, inward turmoil arising from his sin, David hardly will be able to “sing aloud of (God’s) righteousness” (14b).²⁰

David’s “closed mouth” would not have affected only him, however. As king of Israel, David was to be an exemplary and leading worshiper of the Lord before His people. David’s role as the Lord’s anointed king over Israel also renders it logical that his prayer would include a concern for the nation as a whole (cf. vv 18-19). As commentators have noted, David’s sin would have had a deleterious impact on the entire nation. He was not merely an “anonymous sinner,” but actually held a high office within the covenant community, that of God’s chosen ruler over His people. In this role he both “represented God to the people, and the people to God.”²¹ In the case of his plot to have Uriah killed after having committed adultery with Bathsheba, David not only disrupted his private communion with the Lord but also endangered the \dot{s} piritual health of the entire people of God. What harmful effects might this situation have had on the people as a whole?

Following a host of commentators, we have contended that Psalm 51 serves as an exemplary and educational prayer of confession for the believing community. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. All, therefore, are in need of admitting their sin before and against God if they are to share in fellowship with Him. Thus all may utilize this psalm profitably in prayer. However, this psalm also teaches that true believers, after having confessed sin to God, nonetheless may grapple with the heaviness of that sin or struggle to appropriate the grace of God in their hearts. They might confess their sin repeatedly in the same prayer due to their anguished consciences. Like David, they may believe that the Lord is indeed a merciful God who forgives those who confess their sin to Him (1 John 1:8). Yet, also like David, their consciences may come to be so burdened by their transgressions (regardless of the degree of heinousness; see Westminster Shorter Catechism 83) that they are inhibited from worshipping the Lord heartily.

How should the visible church respond to and care for repentant Christians in the condition David describes in Psalm 51? In the next section of this article, we will explore one aspect within the psalm that suggests

17. This is the hifil form of the verb, which adds a causative sense. Cf. Jacob Weingreen, *A Practical Grammar for Classical Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959), 112–115.

18. Tate, *Psalms*, 25.

19. Tate, *Psalms*, 26.

20. “David seems rather to intimate that his mouth must be shut until God called him to the exercise of thanksgiving by extending pardon.” Calvin, *Psalms*, 303.

21. “Kingship Psalms,” *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 378. See also Jack Barentsen, “Restoration and Its Blessings: A Theological Analysis of Psalms 51 and 32,” *Grace Theological Journal* 5,2 (1984): 258.

divinely appointed, corporate aids to the believer's inward grasp of God's mercy in Christ. We also will offer practical, pastoral suggestions as to the church's use of these means as she ministers the gospel to God's flock.

THE SACRAMENTS AS SOURCES OF ENCOURAGEMENT
FOR THE GRIEVING SINNER

Thus far we have observed in Psalm 51 the effects that sin, especially great transgression, may have on the heart of the believer whom God has brought to repentance. One might, and ought to, expect that the offending believer would seek forgiveness and relief privately from the Lord through prayer and the reading of Scripture, even as David in Psalm 51 pursues the Lord personally. Close inspection of this psalm, however, also uncovers public means, instituted by God, that the visible church is to employ in promoting the assurance and edification of believers: the new covenant sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion.

The question immediately arises: Where are baptism and the Supper in Psalm 51? In the strict, word-level sense, they admittedly are not found in this text. It also is obvious that "washings" and "purging with hyssop" (as found in vv 2 and 7) are not equivalent to circumcision and to the Passover meal (which are substantially the Old Covenant equivalents of baptism and Communion in the New; see WCF 27.5). Nonetheless, it is remarkable that David uses liturgical diction in a psalm that is occupied in large part with matters of the unseen, interior life.

Consideration of the ritual terms "wash" and "hyssop" in vv 2 and 7 drives one to the book of Leviticus, where in chapter 8 (to note but one instance) the Lord commands the ceremonial washing of Aaron and of his sons as in their public ordination as priests. Moses washed the ordinands with water, which "symbolize(d) cleansing or purification from sin."²² David also refers to purgation "with hyssop" in Psa 51:7. The hyssop plant was used as a physical instrument with which purifying blood or water was applied to the unclean person (e.g., Lev 14:1-7 concerning the leper, and Num 19:18 regarding one who became unclean through contact with a bone, grave or corpse). Although symbolic and not effective *ex opere operato*, the ritual acts of washing and of the application of water or blood supplied a tangible exhibition of the grace of God, who Himself washed the believer from all his sin and spiritual pollution. Such rituals—instituted as they were by God—added force to the priestly declaration of ritual soundness and fortified the assurance of the cleansed person that he indeed had

been restored to fellowship with the visible covenant community. For the once-ostracized believer, rites of this sort understandably would have been welcomed, especially in view of the grave spiritual implications of having been sent outside the camp during his time of uncleanness.²³

Although the Christian under the New Covenant no longer must (or should!) submit to Old Covenant ceremonies (so, e.g., Gal 5:1; but note the use of Levitical terminology to describe the Christian's purified heart and body in Heb 10:22), Jesus Christ nonetheless has authorized two sacraments, baptism and the Supper, for the care of his church (WSC 92). Christ's fulfillment of all of the Old Testament ceremonies does not mean that his disciples are bereft of visible signs and seals of his covenant blessings. Rather, the Lord's continuing use of physical elements to elucidate and to confirm spiritual realities to the hearts of the faithful is fully in line with pre-Incarnational anthropology and is therefore to be expected even under the New Covenant. In the beginning, God "created man male and female; formed the body of the man of the dust of the ground, and the woman of the rib of the man, (and) endued them with living, reasonable, and immortal souls" (WLC 17). Man's basic constitution did not change with the first advent of Christ. As a spiritual and physical being, therefore, he still profits from tangible signs and seals—when, of course, they are mixed with faith. Drawing a connection between David's citation of purgative rituals in Psalm 51 and the condition of the believer today, Calvin expresses the spiritual profit of divinely decreed, outward ceremonies for the penitent under both covenants:

(David) speaks of *hyssop*, in allusion to the ceremonies of the law; and though he was far from putting his trust in the mere outward symbol of purification, he knew that, like every other legal rite, it was instituted for an important end. The sacrifices were seals of the grace of God. In them, therefore, he was anxious to find assurance of his reconciliation; and it is highly proper that,

22. Mark Rooker, *Leviticus* (NAC 3A; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 142.

23. Reflecting on the purification rituals described in Leviticus 14, Gordon Wenham observes, "The procedures described in this chapter are not curative but ritual.... The rites prescribed here are long and complicated, as befits the great change in status in becoming clean. When someone was pronounced ritually unclean with a skin disease he was excluded from the covenant community. When his complaint cleared up he was readmitted to a life of fellowship within the holy nation. This transition *from death to life* is marked first by ceremonies outside the camp" (emphasis added). Gordon Wenham, *Leviticus* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 207.

when our faith is disposed at any time to waver, we should confirm it by improving such means of divine support. All which David here prays for is, that God would effectually accomplish, in his experience, what he had signified to his Church and people by these outward rites; and in this he has set us a good example for our imitation. It is no doubt to the blood of Christ alone that we must look for the atonement of our sins; but we are creatures of sense, who must see with our eyes, and handle with our hands; and it is only by improving the outward symbols of propitiation that we can arrive at a full and assured persuasion of it. What we have said of the *hyssop* applies also to the *washings* referred to in this verse, and which were commonly practiced under the Law. They figuratively represented our being purged from all iniquity, in order to our reception into the divine favor. I need not say that it is the peculiar work of the Holy Spirit to sprinkle our consciences inwardly with the blood of Christ, and, by removing the sense of guilt, to secure our access into the presence of God.²⁴

Moving beyond the psalm, on a practical level this means that believers must assign great importance to corporate worship in the visible church, where the sacraments are ministered by lawfully ordained elders. How ought Christians to approach the sacraments, especially if they are wrestling with sin and guilt? It should be emphasized that believers must come to the Table first examining their hearts for faith in Christ as Savior, for sincere repentance of their sin, for a desire for new obedience to the Lord and for charity toward their fellow churchmen and, also, toward those outside the church (See 1 Cor 11:27, 28; WLC 171). We also note that the sacrament of baptism is to be administered only once to a person; but even so, followers of Jesus Christ are to “improve our baptism” (WLC 167) as we witness the baptisms of others and reflect on the significance

24. Calvin, *Psalms*, 294–295.

25. The pastoral insight of the American Presbyterian minister and writer Gordon K. Reed on this point is useful: “When the elders in Geneva denied John Calvin’s request to include the Lord’s Supper in every worship service and limited its observation to four times a year, they set a pattern for Presbyterians that has been to our detriment. When we properly prepare ourselves and instruct our people in the true meaning of the Lord’s supper (sic), then a more frequent observation of this sacrament would seem to be in order.... It is by understanding the Scriptures related to the Lord’s supper, and acting upon this knowledge and the Biblical instructions that we are spiritually nourished and thus grow in grace.” Gordon Kenworthy Reed, *Westminster Daily Devotional* (Clinton, MS: Fortress Book Service, 2008), entry for September 22.

26. Ronald Wallace, *Calvin’s Doctrine of the Word and Sacrament* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 1982), 234–253.

of our own baptism. The observance of the sacraments in public worship affords the believer a prime opportunity to meditate on the blessings and responsibilities that flow from union with Christ and to grow, through faithful and thoughtful reception of the elements, in the inward assurance that he is not under the condemnation of God (Rom 8:1).

Further, if the Christian is to realize such benefit from the sacraments, at least two disciplines must be maintained. First, the visible church (namely her elders and pastors) must give due weight to the sacraments as a means of grace for the people of God. This requirement includes the regular observance of the Supper and the baptism of professing believers and their children (as providentially occasioned), along with the reading and preaching of the Scriptures, in services of corporate worship. Granted, the elders of each local body must determine the regularity with which the Supper will be observed in their distinct congregation; but it is our contention from Scripture and secondarily from the Westminster Standards that this holy meal ought to take place with some frequency so long as the minister is feeding the people with a steady diet of the read and preached Word. As well, the elders and ministers ought to be instructing the church consistently in the blessings of a right approach both to the Table and to baptism. Westminster Larger Catechism 167, to which the reader is directed for its rich and searching treatment of the matter of “improving (one’s) baptism,” comments that this is a “needful but much neglected duty.” What was true in the 17th century doubtlessly is true today, and likely in a more pronounced sense. In her practice and in her teaching, the church must impress on her members the vast spiritual blessing that the Good Shepherd bestows on His flock when they carefully observe His sacraments.²⁵

Second, though, it also falls to individual Christians to place themselves under the spiritual oversight of a local session of elders (cf. 1 Thess 5:12–13; Heb 13:17) and to gather regularly with that fellowship of believers for services of worship on the Lord’s Day (and at other appointed times; see Heb 10:19–25). As the sacraments must not be administered privately but only in the presence of the covenant community, with a lawfully ordained minister presiding over the service (cf. Acts 20:7; 1 Cor 11:20–34; also WCF 29.4–5), they are *public* means of grace.²⁶ The significance of baptism extends to the entire church (and even to the world, as a witness to the person and work of Christ) and binds the believer to the communion of saints and the communion of saints to the believer. Similarly, Holy Communion concerns not

only communion with the triune God, which certainly is essential to the church's life, but also communion within the body of Christ. To observe the sacraments privately goes against their very nature and institution as public elements of corporate worship. This means that all Christians—particularly those who are laboring under the heaviness of their sin—must prize membership and faithful participation in the visible church if they are to know the grace and compassion of the Savior more fully. And as they come to the sacraments, they must do so with suitable preparation, knowing that the benefit of these means of grace arises not from a mechanistic use of them but from a prayerful, believing approach by the worshipper.²⁷ As David in vv 2 and 7 perceived the benefit to his soul of the faithful use of divinely instituted rituals, so should the church today.

TWO FURTHER, PUBLIC MEANS FOR THE CONSOLATION OF THE PENITENT

We have contended that Psalms 51:2, 7 broach corporate and public means—found exclusively in the visible church—by which a believer, grieving his sin before God, may find relief from God. Venturing outside of Psalm 51, are there other such means, proper to the visible church that the Lord uses to encourage His repentant people? Although others might be mentioned, we propose two additional public, but sometimes underemphasized, means that the Lord employs to comfort the penitent: the Scriptural pronouncement of forgiveness by the minister during the worship service, and the restoration of sinners following “successful” cases of church discipline.

The Christian could have no assurance of God's forgiveness were it not for His declarations in Scripture. It follows that believers ought to read and to meditate on the Word of God in their personal lives (see Westminster Larger Catechism 156-157). Yet the reading and hearing of God's Word occur not only in private, but also in public worship, by the teaching of Scripture itself (Neh 8:1-3; Rev 1:3). Leaving aside the mandate of God that His people not neglect to assemble themselves for worship, on a secondary level, there is great blessing for Christians as they meet with other members of the body to exalt the Lord and to hear His Word expounded authoritatively by a duly ordained minister.²⁸ In the order of corporate worship, which must be regulated by and saturated with the Word of God, it is proper for the people to confess their sins to the Lord and to hear His Word of pardon spoken to them from Scripture. In fact, reflecting on the pattern of worship outlined in Leviticus, which began with the burnt offering for sin, it

seems inconceivable that a true service of worship could take place without confession of sin and subsequent assurance of forgiveness.²⁹ Given that confession and assurance of pardon should factor into the service, the worshipper stands to reap significant spiritual blessing from attending carefully to this portion of the liturgy. In Matt 16:19, for the purity and health of his church, Jesus entrusted the “keys of the kingdom” to his apostles (and by extension to church officers today, whose ministry is founded on the Scriptural writings of the apostles). When a lawfully (i.e., in accord with Scripture) ordained pastor pronounces the word of pardon directly from God's Word, then, the true penitent should draw immense comfort. Because God has given pastors to His church for her good (Eph 4:11-12), and because the pastor is to read and to preach God's authoritative Word (1 Tim 4:13; 2 Tim 4:2) to the people, worshippers should take heart, for the minister is speaking to them not of his own intuition or opinion but on behalf of God. The Word of grace they are hearing comes not from man but from the Lord in Heaven.³⁰ Thus their assurance of forgiveness is not founded in personal sentiment or in the well-wishes of another but on the authoritative, eternal Word of the Lord, spoken by the man whom He has set apart for so serious a task. The Scriptural declaration of pardon should be a source of tremendous encouragement for the struggling sinner—a means by which the Holy Spirit can cause him to “hear joy and gladness” (Psa 51:8):

God's people, many of whom are inwardly tormented by their sense of guilt, need to be reminded that they have a gracious God who has provided a full atonement for the sins of His believing children. So if they have sincerely confessed their sins, they can be and should be assured of God's full forgiveness.... This element in the service is not the pronouncement of absolution. That is a Roman Catholic practice; it is not the privilege of any minister to declare that anyone has been forgiven for sin. God forgives, and He alone. However, it is perfectly right and proper for worshippers to be assured of the special forgiving grace of God which is based

27. See WLC 171.

28. “To take the Word, sacraments, and prayer for granted—in other words, to disregard public worship as something to be added on to personal devotions or small-group fellowship—is to trivialize worship and put ourselves at risk” Darryl Hart and John Muether, *With Reverence and Awe* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2002), 143.

29. Allen Ross, *Holiness to the Lord* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002), 85–86.

30. Robert Rayburn, *O Come, Let Us Worship* (Seoul: Westminster Publishing House, n.d.), 193.

upon the full atonement of Christ and confirmed by the promises of the Word of God.³¹

There is another aspect of the ministry of the visible church that also assures the believer, particularly in cases of heinous and public sin, when his sorrow for sin is likely to be compounded: the public restoration of the erring, yet repentant, brother or sister following a “successful” instance of church discipline. The very process described in Matthew 18 and mentioned in Gal 6:1 reveals the Lord’s concern for the spiritual government of His covenant people. As WCF 30.1 notes, “The Lord Jesus, as king and head of His Church, has therein appointed a government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate.” And as the Confession observes, the Lord has entrusted the “keys of the kingdom” to His church in order to shut her doors to unbelievers and to open them to those who seek the mercy of God in Jesus Christ (30.2). For the purity of the church, for the preventing of God’s wrath against her for ongoing, unrepentant sin, and for the warning of the faithful, He also has instituted censures of increasing severity—admonition, suspension from the sacrament of the Lord’s Supper, and excommunication from the church (30.4)—to be administered by the officers of the church. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Tim 1:20, notorious offenders are to be excommunicated (“handed over to Satan”) in order that they may be reclaimed (“learn not to blaspheme”), for if the offender does not respond to admonition or to suspension from the Table, the serious step of excommunication must be taken to impress on him the gravity of his sin.

For the purposes of this study, as we focus on the renewal of joy within the penitent, this article will consider only the “positive” side of “successful” church censures: restoration following confession. When a sin is discovered within the church body, Scripture requires that it be dealt with as privately as possible, with the goal of restoring the transgressing brother or sister to the Lord and to those whom he or she has offended (Matt 18:15-20). We note in regard to David’s great sin that Nathan the prophet took this duty seriously. And in Psalms 51:13, David himself promised to “teach sinners”

the ways of God—no doubt including the task of rebuking them in love when necessary. But when the sinner truly repents, his restoration to the Table or, in extreme cases, to the fellowship of the visible church should be a joyous and weighty occasion that affords tangible comfort to the returning believer.

If it receives much attention at all, church discipline frequently carries negative connotations. In his significant work on the doctrine of the church, however, James Bannerman notes that one of the “two grand objects” of the exercise of discipline in the church is to “promote and secure both the obedience and the edification of the members of the Church,” which includes the infliction of penalties for the ultimate good of the erring person.³² As he traces out the boundaries of ecclesiastical authority on earth, Bannerman contends correctly that there is a “spiritual efficacy” in the discipline of the church, but only because the Lord has granted such rights to His church. The benefits of this spiritual power, moreover, only accrue to those who, humanly speaking, have placed themselves within the visible church: she has no authority over those outside her bounds.³³ Whatever might be said about such “limitations” on ecclesiastical power, here we should observe the spiritual danger and, indeed, poverty into which those who reject the authority of the visible church bring themselves. Discipline, as Bannerman writes, is to be viewed as remedial rather than punitive for the offender. It is a blessing, not a curse. If a person professes faith in Christ but does not willingly come under the oversight of a local body of elders, his neglect of membership invites a slew of problems and concerns—among which is the denial of his soul the watchful care of God’s ordained servants.³⁴

As the seriousness of the sin increases (see WSC 83), one may expect the conscience of the sinner to be more deeply stricken. This seems to be the case with David in the wake of his several, egregious violations of the law of God in his affair with Bathsheba. In such situations, how might the “successful” application of church discipline serve as a healing agent for the repentant—and likely humbled and humiliated—brother or sister? Following the classic study by James Durham, *A Treatise Concerning Scandal*, we propose two ways in which the officers of the church may encourage the restored church member. First, the under-shepherds should take care to instruct the “returning” brother concerning the weightiness of his repentance and restoration. Durham sagely warns against the too-frequent application of public rebukes, for not only are such rebukes rare in Scripture, but their repeated implementation only undermines their impact.³⁵ When the officers undertake

31. *Ibid.*, 192.

32. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1868), 2:187.

33. Bannerman, *Church*, 188–189.

34. See Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 2010), 91–93.

35. James Durham, *A Treatise Concerning Scandal* (Dallas: Naphtali Press, 2014), 89.

restorative discipline with a straying sheep, they should impress upon him that his error is a matter of utmost importance. And if that sheep is brought by God back to the fold, they should lay proportionate stress (in their instruction to him and to the whole flock) on the significance of his restoration to the Table or, in extreme cases, to the visible church. If his sin were no small matter, neither were his repentance.³⁶ If the fall of the sinner into sin were great and grievous, his restoration to the communion of Christ's church likewise should be great and joyous.³⁷

Second, the entire proceeding should be colored by tenderness, by which the offender may be reassured of the church's desire for his turning and for his healing in Christ. As Durham writes, "In experience we see that often church censures have weight as they are constructed to proceed from love."³⁸ John MacPherson captures this spirit—and its application—in the following recounting of a case of scandal in Scotland:

That the main object in view in the infliction of such censures was the spiritual benefit of the offender, and that discipline was regarded chiefly as a means of grace can be gathered from this that even if the accused refused to express sorrow and repentance at his appearance on two successive Sabbaths, his defection and contempt were to be made public only on the third Sabbath. Here also all was to be done "with mercy." For on these two Sabbaths when the crime and the admonitions were stated in public, and the person was admonished to make satisfaction which he had refused in private, it was to be done "without specification of his name." And when the preliminary procedure had a good effect, so that the offender, between the first and second Sabbaths, expressed his penitence, his name was not made public, and he was not required to make a public appearance. It was sufficient that on the following Sabbath the minister, "at commandment of the session," make declaration of his repentance and submission in these or other closing words: "But seeing that it hath pleased God to mollify the heart of our brother, whose name we need not to express, so that he hath not only acknowledged his offence, but also hath fully satisfied the brethren that first were offended, and us the Ministry, and hath promised to abstain from all appearance of such evil as whereof he was suspected and admonished, we have no just cause to proceed to any further extremity, but rather to glorify God for the submission of our brother, and unfeignedly pray unto Him that in the like case we and every one of us may give the like obedience." I do not find that a careful reading of the

constitutional history of the Scottish Church, nor an examination of cases and the procedure in them, so far as these are reported, warrants one to say that there was any real lack of tenderness in the law or in the administration of it.³⁹

CONCLUSION

It is a blessing when, by the grace of God, a person frankly confesses his sin. Only by the operation of His Spirit is anyone granted repentance, and such repentance—however painful at the time—is necessary for cleansing to take place through Jesus Christ (Psa 51:17). Yet, as Psalm 51 teaches, heartfelt repentance may carry with it an abiding, reverberating sorrow for sin, to the point that the believer may be slow to appropriate God's mercy and thus reluctant to praise Him in response. Thankfully, the God of grace has provided public, and not merely private, means for assuring His people of His merciful favor. Those, therefore, who deal seriously with their sin do well to treat the visible church and her ministry with similar gravity, because there they meet—after a special manner—"God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort" (2 Cor 1:3). ■

36. "The test the church must use is whether what is done will help to restore the sinner to the place from which he or she has fallen. The thought is that of assistance, not punishment." Leon Morris, *Galatians* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1996), 178.

37. MacPherson notes, "In the First Book of Discipline it is provided that when a penitent offender wishes to make public repentance, 'earnestly desiring the Congregation to pray to God with him for mercy, and to accept him in their society, notwithstanding his former offences, then the Church may and ought receive him as a penitent; for the Church ought to be no more severe than God declareth Himself to be, who witnesseth, that, in whatsoever hour a sinner unfeignedly repenteth and turns from his wicked way, that He will not remember one of his iniquities. And therefore the Church ought diligently to advert that it excommunicate not those whom God absolveth.' Then, in the case of a person who has been excommunicated being publicly restored, this striking injunction is given: 'The Minister ought to exhort the Church to receive that penitent brother into their favour, as they require God to receive themselves when they have offended; and in sign of their consent, the Elders and chief men of the Church shall take the penitent by the hand, and one or two in name of the whole shall kiss and embrace him, with all reverence and gravity, as a member of Christ Jesus.'" John MacPherson, *The Doctrine of the Church in Scottish Theology* (Edinburgh: Macniven and Wallace, 1903), 153.

38. Durham, *Scandal*, 87.

39. MacPherson, *The Doctrine of the Church*, 153.