

Making Confession, Hearing Confession: A History of the Cure of Souls

By: AnneMarie S. Kidder,
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In 1979 I began my ministry as a newly ordained priest in the Episcopal Church in a parish outside of Philadelphia. Almost immediately I was confronted with a responsibility for which I had been given no training or preparation in my years of seminary education. I was told that I would be hearing private confessions at set times during penitential seasons. Somewhat shocked, I turned to my senior pastor and told him that my Evangelical piety and theology had not prepared me for this, and that frankly, I had no idea how to hear confessions. He smiled and said, "You will be on the schedule in a month. I suggest you go and find a confessor that you trust and make your own confession. That is the best training you could get. Good luck. I will check in on you next week and see how you are making out". Before I could sputter out the words forming in my mind ("We Evangelicals don't do auricular confession!") he was gone. I followed his advice and found a wonderful and wise Anglo-Catholic priest who gently guided me to an understanding of the value of sacramental confession and gave me helpful resources for my own disciplines as well as a short essay on different models of confession by Bonnell Spencer, a monk from the Order of the Holy Cross. Spencer's

essay helped me to see that my caricature of the confessional as a juridical model was one of at least four possible perspectives on why and how one confesses sins to another.

Since then, I have been looking for resources that would help me go further in exploring the major historical strands, turning points, theological developments and pastoral practices around the confessional. Many writings on the subject are from narrowly defined Catholic and Protestant perspectives, while others fail to make any connection between a theology of penitence and the pastoral practice of confessing one's sins. AnneMarie Kidder, a Presbyterian pastor and faculty member of the Ecumenical Theological Seminary in Detroit, has tackled the subject from several angles, thoroughly examining church practice through the ages, arguing that the study of the topic is not an archaic undertaking, (xi) but a multifaceted gem that speaks to contemporary issues of piety.

In the first part of her book she explores the origins of public and private confession in the church, addressing the rising popularity of private confession among the laity and its emerging sacramental status. Priests were encouraged to be both proactive and empathic, and authors such as Halitgar, circa 830 A.D., urged priests to "Be solicitous on behalf of sinners." (45) The reference to a delightful spread of hagiographies gives insight into how the early medieval church understood the connection between confession, penance and healing. One example is taken from the life of the Irish saint, Brigit, wherein a deceitful mother is caught by her son for attributing parentage to a priest rather than the actual local man. While the villagers want to burn her for her lies, Brigit intervenes and prescribes a penance. When the

penance is accomplished the “swelling of her head and tongue subside, while ‘the people rejoiced, the bishop was freed, and Brigit was praised.’” (39) These and other stories of monastic instruction such as Benedict’s show the need for pastoral empathy, and how “living in community involves learning to ask for forgiveness and to be reconciled to one another.” (39) The frequency of confession differed for monks and lay people,¹ and there was no uniform or common practice. Of particular note was the shift from a corporate understanding of confession to a model of private confession. “Private confession in the West was a gradual process developing and establishing itself over a period of nearly a thousand years.” (48) Portions of this section might seem recondite to some. However, even the description of how to fast as an act of penance in the “Pesudo-Cummean penitential” (51) (a liturgy with which I had not been previously acquainted!) kept me engrossed. Likewise, Kidder’s discussion of the topic of woman and confession was insightful, particularly as she reviews the Beguines and their “new model of discipleship and spiritual direction.” (73)

The second part of the book addresses the changes begun in the Protestant Reformation and the Council of Trent. For me this was the surprise section of the book as Kidder discusses the evolving understandings of the reformers as they contextualized the topic of confession and penance to their times and circumstances. She elaborates on how Martin Luther, “based on his study of Scripture and Jesus’ injunctions in the gospels in particular, he could retain only three of the seven sacraments: penance, baptism and the Holy Communion.” (116) By 1520 Luther speaks

of it in his *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* by saying, "As to the current practice of private confession, I am heartily in favor of it, even though it cannot be proved from the Scriptures. It is useful, even necessary, and I would not have it abolished. Indeed, I rejoice that it exists in the church of Christ, for it is a cure without equal for distressed consciences." (118)

Kidder's review of the convictions around the subject of Bucer, Zwingli and Calvin were both startling and insightful. Building on Zwingli's desire to make Holy Communion a covenantal pledge of faith and of testimony, Bucer understood the discipline of private confession to be a place where pastors could discern the "evidence of true repentance for sins and a solid faith in Christ as Lord." (143) "The discipline of penance in connection with the Eucharist is as much for the benefit of the individual as for the community." (143) Kidder's entire discussion of Bucer's *De Regno Christi* as well as that of Calvin's *Institutes* is of particular interest to Anglicans given their role as formational influences that shaped the Second Prayer Book of Edward and eventually the 1662 *Book of Common* prayer that was the bedrock of Anglicans for over 400 years. Kidder's subsequent discussion of The Roman Catholic Church after Trent was equally helpful as she points out that the Roman view point held onto the three traditional parts of confession: contrition, confession and penance, (164) whereas the Protestant reformers held onto only the latter two. She also explains how the assessment of perfect contrition was at this point connected to the distinction between mortal and venial sins. Her respectful tone continues into the delicate discussion of indulgences from which Kidder does not withdraw, but reminds the Protestant reader that indulgences were

forbidden to be used for financial abuse or gain. (166) The author concludes the second section with a recounting of the life and teaching of Ignatius and how the Ignatian *Exercises* were formed. Her comparison and contrast of Luther and Ignatius is astute.

The third part of Kidder's book sketches the biblical antecedents and historical developments up to today in the areas of preaching, worship, and confessional litanies as well as traces the decline in private confession. Protestant readers will be surprised to see the evidence for how dramatically Roman Catholics have departed from the confessional. Perhaps the most profound chapter in the book is her exploration of confession through four significant voices of the twentieth century: Rahner, Bonhoeffer, Peterson and van Speyr. She uses Rahner's redefinition of guilt and his theology of grace to redress the trend in contemporary society wherein "people have the impression that it is God who needs to be forgiven and justified...not they themselves and their actions" (250) For Rahner, Kidder explains, the key is to understand that guilt is not cancelled, but it is *overcome*." (252) For Evangelicals this angle of approach may be problematic as it has significant consequences for the understanding of atonement. Her review of Bonhoeffer's thinking is helpful in drawing together his thought in *Ethics* and its relationship to *Life Together*. Her biggest emphasis in this section is on Bonhoeffer's call to the Roman Church to regain the focus on preaching while simultaneously appealing to Protestants to reclaim "the divine office of the confessional." (266) The section on Eugene Peterson I found less helpful, particularly in respect to the way in which Peterson defines sin as "the absence of love". (271)

The most arresting section of Kidder's entire book is her discussion of the contribution of Adrienne von Speyr. Here Kidder introduces von Speyr the modern day mystic who turned to Hans Urs von Balthasar as her spiritual director. Von Balthasar, in turn, made van Speyr's mystic writings known to the world. Kidder points to the grounding of Speyr's approach in the Genesis story where humankind chooses to become secretive rather than naked. For von Speyr, confession of sin does two things. First, it becomes the place where we have "renounced our own efficacy in favor of God's efficacy." (282) But more importantly, it is the place where "penitents who return to God (to) uncover themselves completely, and become transparent. Such uncovering and transparency before God, resulting from a self-surrender through which God's word can fill the void that has been best prepared, takes place in confession." (282)

Kidder highlights the fact that von Speyr has come to her conclusions about confession of sin from her reflections on the Trinity. The members of the Trinity are transparent in their revelation of themselves to each other. In her book *Confession* she writes:

For God it is bliss to reveal himself before God. The God who sees would naturally have, in human terms, the ability to see without something being shown to him; for example, when god sees the sin of a person who, like Adam, conceals himself. There is in God, however, the bliss of revealing himself and the bliss of seeing what has been shown, the joy of mutual communication encompassing both revelation and the beholding of something revealed.¹

¹ Von Speyr, *Confession*, Amazon Kindle location 235

Prior to reading this book, I never would have thought of our confessing of sins to one another as following a pattern of mutual communication within the Trinity. I suspect I shall be wrestling with this thought for years to come.

Her book concludes with very practical applications for spiritual direction from a variety of perspectives. She makes concrete suggestions for spiritual directors, both pastors and lay persons. She also explores the need from those who seek spiritual direction. She has provided a pulling together of the resources available, the challenges to be faced, and the blessings to be experienced. This book will serve many well including the church historian, the liturgist, the spiritual director, the theologian, the Doctor of Ministry Degree Director and the devout Christian with a desire to grow spiritually. It will also speak to a wide variety of contexts, identity and circumstances. She shows convincingly that the topic of the confession of sin is not archaic, but is indeed a multifaceted gem speaking to contemporary issues of piety.