

Confession

(A Catholic response to Protestant objections)

Many Protestants falsely assert that Sacrament of Reconciliation and confessing one's sins to a priest is unbiblical. Their rejection of this Sacrament is based on the notion that there no longer a human priesthood and that Jesus alone is our priest. They base this on certain Biblical text such as **Hebrews 7:22–25**, which says:

*“This makes Jesus the surety of a better covenant. The former priests **were many in number**, because they were prevented by death from continuing in office; but **he holds his priesthood permanently**, because he continues for ever. Consequently he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives **to make intercession for them.**”*

This text, they say, abolishes the need for a human priesthood.

Furthermore, they add the following verse to their arsenal of “*proof*” against the idea of the priesthood:

1 Timothy 2:5, which says, *“For there is one God, and there is **one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus.**”*

Christ, they say is the only mediator and there is no need for any other. Is that so? Let's look at what the following verses have to say about that:

Peter 2:5–9 says, *“Like living stones **be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.** . . . **But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people.**”*

While Jesus, whose sacrifice on our behalf is eternally present before the Father, is our priest, our intercessor, our mediator before the Father in a special sense – we are **ALL** called to be priests, mediators and intercessors.

St. Paul is emphatic about our intercessory function in **1 Tim. 2:1–2**, when he says, *“First of all, then, I urge that **supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions.**”*

In **1 Cor. 12:12-20**, he tells us that we are all parts of the same Body of Christ that support each other. He says that there should be no disunity among us and goes so far as to say that if one part of the Body suffers, **all** the parts suffer with it. Conversely, if one part is honored, **all** the parts share its joy. That is how *radically* we are joined to the Body of Christ.

It is ironic that Protestants will reject the idea that we can intercede for one another to God, yet they, too will pray for one another and ask each other for prayer. After all, aren't we told in **James 5:16** that *“the fervent prayer of a righteous person is efficacious?”*

The practice of telling our sins directly to a priest is based directly in Scripture. Three times in the Gospels (**Matt. 16:19, 18:18 and John 20:23**), we read where Jesus gave the Apostles the power to forgive sins or to hold them bound. This is not a something that Jesus took lightly. In **John 20:21-23**, Jesus (*who is God*) breathes on the Apostles as he is giving them this power:

(Jesus) said to them again, "Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, so I send you."

*And when he had said this, **he breathed on them** and said to them, "Receive the holy Spirit. **Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained."***

The fact that Jesus breathed on the Apostles when entrusted them with this ministry is highly significant because he doesn't do this anywhere else in the New Testament. In fact, there are only *two* times in **ALL** of Scripture where God breathes on man: The **first** is when he breathed life into Adam. The **second** is here in John's Gospel when he is giving them the power to forgive or retain sins.

Many Protestants will have you believe that Jesus was merely telling them that they now had the power to *recognize* sins – but that is **NOT** what he said (***Whose sins you forgive are forgiven them, and whose sins you retain are retained***). The Greek word used here for the word "forgive" is *aphiemi*, which means: *to send away, to send forth, yield up, to expire, to let go, give up a debt, forgive, to remit.*

The practice of confessing your sins to the Church is an ancient one that goes all the way back to the Apostles themselves. We see this in the 1st century document, the **Didache** (***The Teachings of the Twelve Apostles***), where it emphatically states the necessity of confessing our sins to the Church:

"Confess your sins in Church, and do not go up to your prayer with an evil conscience. This is the way of life. . . , On the Lord's Day gather together, break bread, and give thanks, after confessing your transgressions so that your sacrifice may be pure" (Didache 4:14,14:1 [A.D.70]).

St. Paul makes no small case for this ministry of reconciliation clearly in **2 Cor. 5:18-20**: ***"And all this is from God, who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting their trespasses against them and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God."***

In **2 Cor. 2:10**, he states, ***"Whomever you forgive anything, so do I. For indeed what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for you in the presence of Christ"***

We must remember, as with all Protestant objections to Catholic Sacraments and Doctrines, their objections came some **1500** years **after** the Apostles had spent a lifetime teaching about them, practicing them and handing them down to following generations.

Early Church Teachings on Confession

It is always important to compare the teachings of the Church today with those of the Early Church. The Early Church Fathers have much to say on the topic of Confession and Reconciliation:

Ignatius of Antioch

For as many as are of God and of Jesus Christ are also with the bishop. ***And as many as shall, in the exercise of penance, return into the unity of the Church***, these, too, shall

belong to God, that they may live according to Jesus Christ (*Letter to the Philadelphians* 3 [A.D. 110]).

Irenaeus

[The Gnostic disciples of Marcus] have deluded many women. . . Their consciences have been branded as with a hot iron. ***Some of these women make a public confession, but others are ashamed to do this, and in silence, as if withdrawing from themselves the hope of life of God, they either apostatize entirely or hesitate between two courses*** (*Against Heresies* 1:22 [A.D. 189]).

Tertullian

The Church has the power of forgiving sins. This I acknowledge and adjudge (Repentance 10:1 [A.D. 203]).

Hippolytus

(*Regarding ordination of Bishops*) . . . grant this your servant, whom you have chosen for the episcopate, [the power] to feed your holy flock and to serve without blame as your high priest, ministering night and day to propitiate unceasingly before your face and to offer to you the gifts of your holy Church, ***and by the Spirit of the high priesthood to have the authority to forgive sins, in accord with your command*** (*Apostolic Tradition* 3 [A.D. 215]).

Origen

[A filial method of forgiveness], albeit hard and laborious [is] the remission of sins through penance, when the sinner . . . ***does not shrink from declaring his sin to a priest of the Lord and from seeking medicine***, after the manner of him who say, "I said, to the Lord, I will accuse myself of my iniquity" (*Homilies in Leviticus* 2:4 [A.D. 248]).

John Chrysostom

Priests have received a power which God has given neither to angels nor to archangels. It was said to them: "*Whatsoever you shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven; and whatsoever you shall loose, shall be loosed.*" Temporal rulers have indeed the power of binding: but they can only bind the body. ***Priests, in contrast, can bind with a bond which pertains to the soul itself and transcends the very heavens.*** Did [God] not give them all the powers of heaven? "*Whose sins you shall forgive,*" he says, "*they are forgiven them; whose sins you shall retain, they are retained.*" The Father has given all judgment to the Son. ***And now I see the Son placing all this power in the hands of men*** [Matt. 10:40; John 20:21-23]. They are raised to this dignity as if they were already gathered up to heaven (*The Priesthood* 3:5 [A.D. 387]).