Do the Saved Need to Confess Sins?

INTRODUCTION

A. Confession in the world – The word "confess" occurs in the news mostly in connection with criminals confessing to a crime they had committed. Often it is politicians who are confessing – ones we've entrusted to govern us properly. Many times the punishment doesn't fit the confession or the crime – including all the cases of plea-bargaining.

B. Confession in the Word

Confession of sins is clearly not a prominent theme in God's Word. The word "confess" occurs in a mere 38 of the 31,173 verses of Scripture. Some passages that use the word deal with confessing the name of the Lord (or, specifically, the name of Jesus) or confession of some fact, identity, belief, or situation – rather than confession of sin.

Of the 28 times the word "confess" appears, only 8 are with the idea of confessing sins (Lev 5:5; 16:21; 26:40; Num 5:7; Neh 1:6; Ps 32:5; Ja 5:16 ["faults"]; 1Jn 1:9). Of the 7 passages that use "confessed," Nehemiah 9:2 includes "their sins," and Ezra 10:1, Nehemiah 9:3, and Acts 19:18 seem to indicate that sins are involved. The participle "confessing" occurs three times in the Bible (Dan 9:20; Mt 3:6; Mk 1:5), and all three places deal with sin. Fifteen passages. Of the only two verses written to believers in this age of grace, only one (1 John 1:9) connects confession of sins to forgiveness.

I. The problem

It is this one verse of Scripture ("If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.") that numerous leaders in churches, schools, and on the Internet use to claim that – even after salvation – believers today need to keep confessing their sins to God. Many believers have even memorized 1 John 1:9 while misunderstanding its truth. It is argued that 1 John 1:9 proves a difference between what can be called "judicial" (or "positional") forgiveness (a true Bible doctrine and reality) and a so-called "parental" ("positional") forgiveness. Their key assertion is that unconfessed sin in our daily lives is unforgiven and breaks "fellowship." Some think some sins (sins <u>after</u> salvation) are forgiven twice; others seem to think only sins committed <u>before</u> salvation are forgiven at the time of salvation.

II. Forgiveness

To determine the accuracy or inaccuracy of this idea we must investigate the subject of God's forgiveness of sin. This topic is mentioned in 26 New Testament verses (10 with "forgive," 6 with "forgiveness," and 10 with "remission"). One important fact stands out from these passages – namely, that **not even one passage** attaches these manmade modifiers ("judicial" or "parental") to forgiveness or in any way hints that there are two types or levels of forgiveness.

For example, one Evangelical leader asserted that "**<u>continual</u>** confession of sin is an indication of genuine salvation," and "the Lord **<u>continually</u>** forgives His own" (John MacArthur, ***The MacArthur Bible Commentary***, 2005, pp. 1950, 1951 – my emphasis). Yet, the Bible says that Jesus died once (Heb 7:27: 9:12; 10:10) and God forgave ALL believers' sins – **<u>at Calvary</u>**. As Paul put it in Colossians 2:13-14, God forgave "ALL [our] trespasses" (i.e., sins) **<u>before</u>** He "quickened" us (literally, "made us alive" – that is, brought us to life) in Christ. No place in the Bible does it say that any sins need be forgiven twice – "judicially" (when we initially trust in Jesus for salvation) and "parentally" (during our Christian lives). A chorus that is true to Scripture says it so clearly: "ALL my sins are gone, gone because of Calvary."

Some Christians hold to a doctrinal position that postpones God's forgiveness of believers' sins even farther away from Calvary. They think God waits till after we die to forgive some of our sins. Some is this group think they have to endure a period of time in a place they call Purgatory before some of their sins are forgiven (paid for). Others think we have to wait even more – till we get to heaven – before God fully forgives those who get there. Along this line, a little boy once asked his mom, "When we get to heaven, will God forgive us for <u>everything</u>?" The mother said, "Of course He will." The boy thought for a moment and replied, "Well, He's going to be really busy when **<u>WE</u>** get there!" Neither of these ideas has any Bible evidence to support it. It comes from speculation, wild imagination, and maybe even Satanic origination. For believers, forgiveness took place at Calvary; for unbelievers, forgiveness will never occur.

III. Fellowship

Another topic that needs to be properly understood is that of fellowship (since John includes it in the context under consideration). The current common English use of the word "fellowship" (to refer to getting together for social interaction and conversation) is far different from the Bible's concept.

The Greek word for "fellowship" is ***koinōnía*** (found just before 1Jn 1:9 in 1John 1:3,6,7). It literally means "have in common, be partakers or partners." At its core is the idea of a connection, partnership, or relationship (it's been

said in simple terms to mean "two fellows in the same ship") – not merely social interaction or talking together. Believers are related to God (vv. 3 & 6) and to each other (v. 7).

As many Christian voices regrettably explain it nowadays, 1John 1:9 means that if believers have unconfessed sin in their lives, their fellowship (communion or communication) with God is broken; in essence, they say believers are no longer on speaking terms with God. However, that idea shows that these pastors and writers don't know the real meaning of ***koinōnía*** ("fellowship"). If (as they say) God somehow required believers to confess their sins continually in their Christian lives, then, biblically speaking, lack of confession would break our connection (relationship, ***koinōnia*** – not "conversation") with God; we would lose our salvation and, thus, would no longer be His sons. THAT, we know from the rest of Scripture, cannot happen; once we're saved, we're saved FOREVER – once a person is born again, he or she cannot be unborn. (Jn 3:36; 5:24; 6:39; 10:28,29; Rom 8:30,33,34,35,38-39; Eph 1:13-14; Php 1:6; 1Jn 5:11,13,20)

Let's remember some things the Apostle Paul said about ***koinōnía*** (fellowship): "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them." (Eph 5:11) To the Philippian church he expressed his thankfulness "For your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now." (Php 1:5) This clearly refers to their spiritual and financial partnership – not their getting together to talk. In Romans 15:26 he used the word in referring to the "contribution" sent to the Jerusalem believers from Achaia and Macedonia. Paul used two Greek words to emphasize this same core idea of "fellowship" to the Corinthians: "Be not unequally yoked together with unbelievers; for what partaking (***metochē***) does righteousness have with unrighteousness, and what partnership (***koinonia***) does light have with darkness?" (2Co 6:14)

IV. The people involved

Misunderstanding 1John 1:9 is easy – if we ignore the context. Such is often the case with "problematic" verses.

The misunderstanding comes by forgetting that this verse is sandwiched between verses 8 and 10. Verse 8 says "If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us." How much clearer could it be that John is addressing the unsaved? No saved person would ever claim to "have no sin." In fact, in order to be saved one has to realize that he or she does have sin; we're all born with a sin nature that needs salvation. The last part of verse 8 is just as revealing and vital to the proper interpretation of verse 9. If "the truth is not in" someone, it shows that that person is not saved.

Likewise, verse 10 says something that indicates about whom John is writing. "If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us." This seems to clearly refer to not just any unsaved person, but to someone who is somehow claiming to be REALLY good – perfect, having "not sinned." Again, it must be asked, "Could or would any truly saved individual ever claim to have not sinned? The admission of sin in one's life is part of the essential process that only the saved go through when they trust in Jesus for salvation. Furthermore, John adds the fact "His word in not in" such folks. God's Word has not taken root in that individual. It's not there; thus, he or she is not saved.

V. Confession

The meaning of the Greek verb for "confess" (***homologeō***) is another important factor needed to properly understand 1 John 1:9. It means literally "to say the same" (to acknowledge, admit, or agree). When God saves someone, that person trusts in Jesus for salvation while admitting or agreeing with God that he or she is sinful. That's an essential for salvation.

Confession in 1 John 1:9 is not verbally voicing sins – to God or anyone else. In fact, if it meant that during our Christian life we must confess each and every sin, what happens with forgotten sins? Would we still be saved – with unconfessed, unforgiven sin? Would that sin be "on our record" in heaven? Also, many believers are so immature that they don't even recognize that some things in their lives are sins. Again, would God let them into heaven with "unconfessed sin" in their lives? Remember, too, that God may see some things as sin that we in our humanity never would recognize as such.

VI. One Isolated Verse

One question should always be asked when a doctrine someone tries to base it on just one verse of Scripture. Why, if it's so important, didn't God see fit to have it recorded many more times? In other words, if believers need to keep asking God for forgiveness as often as they sin, why didn't more Bible writers see fit to tell that idea to their converts and readers?

CONCLUSIONS

A. At Calvary, Jesus paid for all sins of all those trusting in His shed blood. The forgiveness of our sins was an historical (ONCE-FOR-ALL) event, not a continual (ONGOING) process.

B. We confess (agree with God) at conversion that we are sinners in need of His gracious salvation.

C. To add to this a different kind of "confession" (of sin) after salvation contradicts Bible truth.

D. To please God, believers are, of course, to recognize sin's evil, recoil from it, and regret it when it occurs.