

## Repentance: Public Confession?

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### Public Confession?

If a Christian falls away to sin and it is known both within the church and outside, is it necessary for that Christian to repent before the church? Could you please give some scriptures in answer? I have always been taught that the repentance should go as far as the sin, in other words, if it is known within and without the church, it needs to be addressed before the whole church. I know private sins are then only between the individual and God.

Where does the Bible teach that when we sin in a public way, we must confess our sin to the church?

The Bible speaks both about private sins and public sins and what our attitude should be toward both. In thinking about private sins, there are two types. The first are private sins that are known only between God and us, individually. When we sin in this way, we have the obligation to confess that sin to God. John writes in [1 John 1:9](#), "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Once we have repented and made that confession to God then the blood of Christ forever erases that sin.

There is a second kind of private sin that can be committed as well. This is when one brother sins against another brother. This kind of sin is not public because it was only committed in the presence of a one or a few Christians. The Bible teaches that when such a sin is committed that we are to handle it in as discreet a way as possible. Love will not try to publish this sin beyond its original circle of influence but will try to keep the sin concealed to as few as possible. [1 Peter 4:8](#) says, "above all things being fervent in your love among yourselves; for love covereth a multitude of sins." However, Jesus makes it clear that while our attitude should be to deal with this in a private way, if the person who has committed the sin refuses to repent of that sin, then others are to get involved. [Matthew 18:15-17](#) says, "And if thy brother sin against thee, go, show him his fault between thee and him alone: if he hear thee, thou hast gained thy brother. But if he hear thee not, take with thee one or two more, that at the mouth of two witnesses or three every word may be established. And if he refuse to hear them, tell it unto the church: and if he refuse to hear



Must we confess our sin to the church?

the church also, let him be unto thee as the Gentile and the publican.” There is a three step process that is laid out here. First talk to the person individually and if the problem is resolved, let it go. Second, if the problem is not resolved one on one, then take two or three more with you so that the matter may be established. Third, if the problem still cannot be resolved, then bring it before the church. Then the church has the obligation to withdraw fellowship from the one who has sinned. Let’s be clear, however, this is still in regard to sin that was first committed in a semi-private environment.

Public sins, however, are handled quite differently within the New Testament and we have several examples of public sin. The first public sin that was committed within the church was that of Ananias and Sapphira. We find this recorded in [Acts 5:1-11](#). This couple sold some land and gave part of the price to the church, but claimed that they had given the entire price to the church. In essence they lied about the amount of money they had given to the church. In a very public way, Peter confronted Ananias about the money. No doubt, opportunity was given Ananias to change his story and confess the truth, but he did not do this and God took his life away. In the same day, Peter asked Sapphira about the money and she too refused to tell the truth and she met the same fate as her husband. Now while God does not use miraculous means of church discipline today, the church is still expected to exercise earthly discipline in this regard. The great failure of Ananias and Sapphira was not in that they sinned, for all men commit sin according to [1 John 1:8](#) and 10. The failure of Ananias and Sapphira was that they failed to confess their very public sin in a public way—before Peter and the rest of the church. Had they made confession, no doubt, they would have been forgiven.

In [Acts 8](#) we read of another public sin. Simon the sorcerer was watching how the apostles were bestowing miraculous gifts to the newly converted Christians and offered Peter money for the ability to bestow miraculous gifts as well. Simon’s motive for wanting these gifts was that he wanted to use them for his own profit. However Peter rebukes Simon in [Acts 8:20, 21](#). He then tells Simon these words, “Repent therefore of this thy wickedness, and pray God, if perhaps the thought of thine heart may be forgiven thee. For I perceive that thou art in the gall of bitterness, and in the bond of iniquity. Then answered Simon, and said, Pray ye to the Lord for me, that none of these things which ye have spoken come upon me.” Notice that Simon was given the opportunity to repent just like Ananias and Sapphira. However, instead of refusing to repent, he did repent and asked for them to pray for him. Simon gives us an example of one who sinned publicly and then realized his mistake and made correction. The result was that he confessed his sin, asked for prayer and was forgiven.

In [Galatians 2:11](#) Paul tells us that Peter committed a public sin. Paul writes, “But when Peter was come to Antioch, I withstood him to the face, because he was to be blamed.” Paul rebuked Peter in a public way for Peter’s hypocrisy. Again in this example we find public sin dealt with in a public way.

Finally, we have the example of the man who was committing fornication in the church at Corinth. The sin in which this man was engaged was a public sin. Paul writes in the first part of the chapter that it was “commonly reported” regarding this man’s situation. The remedy that Paul gives for this problem was to handle it in a very public way. In [1 Corinthians 5:13](#) Paul tells the church at Corinth to “♦put away from among yourselves that wicked person.” Was the problem regarding this person that he had committed a sin? This was not the problem at all, but that he refused to admit his sin and repent of it. We find in [2 Corinthians 2:6, 7](#) this man did repent, but that the church in Corinth refused to forgive him. Paul writes,

“Sufficient to such a man is this punishment, which was inflicted of many. So that contrariwise ye ought rather to forgive him, and comfort him, lest perhaps such a one should be swallowed up with overmuch sorrow.” What do we learn from this example? There was a public sin. The man initially refused to repent. The church withdrew fellowship from him. He then publicly repented and confessed. The church then was obligated to forgive him. Herein lies the pattern for dealing with public sin today.

In [James 5:16](#) we read, “Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed.” This is perhaps the most direct passage of scripture that deals with confessing sins one to another and it addresses both semi-private and public sin. The Bible teaches that there are separate processes for handling these sins. There is a process for private sin, semi-private sin, and public sin. We must honor God’s pattern in this regard. God is consistent, however, with each of these situations. If we sin privately and we refuse to confess to God privately, then we will have no forgiveness. If we sin semi-privately and we refuse to confess semi-privately we will have no forgiveness. If we sin publicly and we refuse to confess publicly then we will have no forgiveness. The bottom line is when we sin, whether private, semi-private, or public, and then act as if it is no big deal and refuse to repent and confess our sin (regardless what kind of sin it is), we are rejecting God’s plan for our ongoing salvation. We are refusing to acknowledge that forgiveness is in the blood of Christ. We are rejecting the covenant for which Jesus died. Let us always seek to acknowledge our sins in the way that God would have us acknowledge them, according to the pattern set forth in the scriptures.

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