

# **Waking Up to Corporate Confession: What Scripture Does and Does Not Say About Corporate Guilt and Repentance**

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In 2020, the death of George Floyd touched off a series of questions about racism and corporate guilt, not to mention justice and the justice system. In churches across the country, decisions split as to the right public response. Similarly, academics took up the issue, albeit often in more popular platforms. For instance, Michael Rhodes asked online, “Should We Repent of Our Grandparents’ Racism?” And Kyle Dillon wrote for The Gospel Coalition, “Are We Held Accountable for the Sins of Our Forefathers?” In both articles, biblical theology was used to affirm the need for modern individuals to identify with the sins of their fathers.

What can be appreciated in these articles was the way these men applied Scripture, especially the Old Testament, to contemporary questions. What was problematic, however, was the way they made applications that did not address the covenantal differences between Israel and today. As Stephen Wellum has demonstrated in his chapter on doing ethics from the perspectives of Progressive Covenantalism, the Old Testament remains needful for instruction, correction, reproof, and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16–17), but biblical ethicists must recognize covenantal differences when they apply God’s Word.

In this paper, I will pick up where Wellum left off and apply progressive covenantal categories to questions about corporate guilt and repentance. In particular, I will seek to answer some of the following questions:

- Are new covenant believers responsible for the sins of their ancestors?
- How should we apply Leviticus 26:40–44, which calls for the need to confess the sins of our fathers?
- Do the corporate confessions of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah call us to do the same?
- How does the New Testament understand confession in the corporate sense?
- And most specifically, if we were to turn the clock back to 2020, what might we say from Scripture about the practice of corporate confessions.

In what follows, I will answer these questions and show how progressive covenantalism provides a more robust biblical answer to ethical questions concerning corporate guilt, generational sin, and corporate repentance.

## Getting Into the Debate

Today, there are a few proof texts being used to demand other to confess their corporate guilt for the sins of their fathers. In particular, Daniel 9, Ezra 1, and Nehemiah 9, have become well-worn by ministers of various ethnicities to instruct white Christians, in the wake of BLM Marches, to confess the racism of their fathers and to repent for their guilt by association.<sup>1</sup> As Union University professor and Presbyterian minister, Michael Rhodes, puts it in his article on the subject,<sup>2</sup>

Scripture demands that I confess that white supremacy is a deadly sickness my ancestors carried with them as they created culture, founded institutions, built schools, told stories, and gathered in churches. I live and work in the world they helped to create, and I confess that I have been infected by their contagion.

What Rhodes argues is that Scripture condemns “racism” and that Scripture commands future generations to admit, confess, repent, and repair the sins of their fathers. Arguing from Scripture, the earnest reader may quickly conclude that Rhodes argument is sound. But is it? Does the way Scripture speak about corporate confession, restitution, and repentance match the way contemporary advocates of social justice urge corporate confession and reparations? That is an important question and one that requires more than connecting concerns for justice with biblical prooftexts.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows, I am going to argue that most who claim that Scripture demands corporate confession do so by misreading Scripture in two ways. First, relying heavily on the Old Testament, they fail to appreciate the distinction between old and new covenants, and second, they principalize and overgeneralize texts, instead of letting the specific context and content of the passage speak. I will not, in this paper, argue for a pure individualism, for both old and new covenants create peoples who are in covenant with one another. That said, I will argue that when Christians read Scripture without recognizing the covenantal differences between Israel and the Church, flawed readings and unbiblical demands result. Exhibit A is Michael Rhodes “demand” for Christians to repent of their ancestors racism.

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<sup>1</sup> In the Bible, there are only two races. There is the human race, whose head is Adam and from whom all nations derive (cf. Acts 17:26). And there is God’s “chosen race” (1 Pet. 2:9), whose head is Christ and whose composition is the redeemed from every nation (Rev. 5:9–10). With those two covenantal heads in mind, the division between those who have the Spirit and those who do not (cf. 1 Cor. 2:10–16) is the main division in the world. Every member of Adam’s fallen race stand condemned in Adam (Rom. 5:12–21), and justification comes individually as God transfers his children out of darkness and into the kingdom of the beloved Son (Col. 1:13–14).

Noting the way Scripture speaks of two races, I will not use the same terminology, for “racism” only reinforces a concept that does not match Scripture. In the abstract, one can say that Scripture condemns racism, but if we are really going to make headway, we need to get more specific. For a further development on racism, and especially the more popular term “racialization,” see my *Dividing the Faithful: How a Little Book on Race Fractured a Movement Founded on Grace* (Douglasville, GA: G3 Press, 2023). This book responds to the sociological landmine by Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford, 2000).

<sup>2</sup> Michael Rhodes, “Should We Repent of Our Grandparents’ Racism? Scripture on Intergenerational Sin,” <https://hebraicthought.org/repenting-intergenerational-racist-ideology-scripture-intergenerational-sin/>.

<sup>3</sup> On the difference between biblical ‘social justice’ (a term used by Peter Gentry in *Kingdom through Covenant*) and modern versions of social justice, see Thaddeus Williams, *Confronting Injustice without Compromising Truth: 12 Questions Christians Should Ask about Social Justice* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020).

In his article, Rhodes does not make a distinction between the covenants, or acknowledge that all of the passages which speak of corporate confession are directed to the natural born offspring of Abraham. Rather, he takes commands to Israel and makes demands for new covenant Christians. Of course, the Hebrew canon is given to the Church (see Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:1–11; 1 Tim. 3:15–16), but the old covenant, as a covenant, is not.<sup>4</sup> Admittedly, Rhodes’ view of the covenant is closer to that of our Presbyterian and Reformed brethren, but set in the context of a modern ethical quandary, the negative effects of the single covenant of grace can be more readily apparent.

Indeed, Rhodes demands that modern Christians should feel the guilt of their ancestors’ actions, and he uses Leviticus, the prayers of the exiles (Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah), and words from the Prophets to justify his claim. Together, these passages are used to say that Scripture “demands” corporate repentance and confession for sins committed by our ancestors, but does it? Do the old covenant commands of Moses apply directly today? Do the covenantal stipulations in Israel inform black and white relations today? And does Scripture confirm or deny a view of the world that groups people by color? Or, do we need to consider more carefully how Scripture does and does not apply today and how its covenantal structures inform the way we pursue corporate confession? This is what I will seek to answer below.

In what follows, I will primarily engage Rhodes argument, even as I consider a few other examples of arguments that use Scripture without attending to the covenantal structure of Scripture. Then, I will show why these moral imperatives to confess the sins of our fathers are not biblical. Finally, I will suggest a better way of showing how individuals do impact others and how sins and sinners are not isolated from one another. In other words, in arguing against the demand for “corporate repentance,” I am not arguing for pure individualism. I am arguing that how we read Scripture matters and that direct applications from Leviticus and Daniel to the universal church today, to give just two examples, will result in misleading and unbiblical imperatives.

## **The Argument**

To begin, I want to highlight what Rhodes has said about Scripture. We can summarize his views on Scripture into six points.<sup>5</sup>

1. He acknowledges that Scripture speaks of individual sin and individual judgment (see Jer. 31:29; Ezek. 18:4).
2. He accounts for and will draw his argument from the places where Scripture speaks of generational sin and judgment (see Exod. 34:7; Lev. 26:40), as well as prayers that confess the sins of previous generations (Neh. 1:5; 9:2; Dan. 9:16).

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<sup>4</sup> On this point, see Stephen J. Wellum, “Progressive Covenantalism and the Doing of Ethics,” in *Progressive Covenantalism: Charting a Course between Dispensational and Covenantal Theologies*, ed. Stephen J. Wellum and Brent E. Parker (Nashville: B & H Academic, 2016), 216–18.

<sup>5</sup> Because his online essay is not paginated, you can search for the Scriptures I reference to find the corresponding points in his annotated article, or you can search for key words like “pixelated” or “white supremacy.”

3. He rightly critiques those who prefer one view over the other and “pick the one we like.” In turn, he calls for a “pixelated” view of the Bible. Drawing on the work of Dru Johnson, Rhodes calls us to consult the full picture.<sup>6</sup> “Each pixel captures a true and essential aspect of the ‘full picture.’ Taken individually, some images may seem quite different from others. But when we step back, each individual pixel contributes to the overall picture.”
4. He offers Leviticus 25 and 26:40–44 as two passages in the Law which call for “repairing” and restoring what others have taken. He doesn’t make an immediate application to reparations, but his endnotes cite those who do. From here, he makes multiple claims that White Supremacy is the cause for economic inequalities between blacks and whites today.<sup>7</sup>
5. He makes a curious case from Romans 6, that capital S “Sin” enslaves humanity. Such Sin, he says of Paul, comes from “the sinful patterns we learned under Sin’s lordship,” and they “linger on even after Christ offers his people forgiveness and delivers them from Sin’s enslaving power.” Taking the next step, he says that Paul’s instructions to not present our bodies as instruments of Sin includes “intergenerational repentance.” He argues plausibly that the “sinful habits of our ancestors have worked themselves deep into our minds, bodies, and hearts,” and then applies the Spirit’s power to do what the Law requires—generational confession.
6. Finally, he offers a few words of personal confession for his own ancestors and models what has been advocating—an acknowledgement of guilt by ancestral association and a full-throated renouncement of his ancestor’s sins.

In our cultural moment, or at least in the cultural moment of 2020, Rhodes’s article is what people wanted to hear.<sup>8</sup> But I am not convinced his approach to corporate repentance is what the church needs to hear, because the way he handles Scripture does not fully explicate the content of Scripture.

### **Biblical Theological Problems**

As we begin, it is important to note that Rhodes (and others) make most of their claims about corporate repentance from the Old Testament. Rhodes is actually unique in that he also cites Romans 6. By and large, however, the syllogism goes like this

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<sup>6</sup> See Dru Johnson, *Biblical Philosophy: A Hebraic Approach to the Old and New Testaments* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> Concerning his views of white supremacy, he refers to the work of Chanequa Walker-Barnes, *I Bring the Voices of My People: A Womanist Vision of Racial Reconciliation* (Eerdmans, 2019), 43–62. For those interested in this debate, I would refer readers to Thomas Sowell, *Discrimination and Disparities* (New York: Basic Books, 2021).

<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, the shine of Critical Race Theory has worn off since 2019, when the Southern Baptist Convention advocated a chastened-form of CRT by passing Resolution 9, or in 2020, when antiracism fueled riots across the country. Even the New York Times is now publishing opinions that question the leading voice of antiracism, Ibram X. Kendi. See Pamela Paul, “‘Antiracism’ Was Never the Right Answer,” *New York Times*, October 5, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/10/05/opinion/ibram-x-kendi-racism.html>

**Biblical Presupposition:** The Old Testament is inspired by God and therefore useful for Christians today (2 Tim. 3:15–17).

**Argument 1:** The Old Testament commands and models corporate repentance (see e.g., Leviticus 26 and Daniel 9)

**Argument 2:** We must obey and imitate all that Scripture teaches.

**Conclusion:** We must offer corporate confession for the sins of our ancestors.

This is the basic argument for corporate confession, but it misses a few important caveats.

**Caveat 1:** While all Scripture is inspired by God and useful for teaching, the old covenant came to an end when Christ died and rose again. Today, we live under the new covenant and cannot directly apply covenant categories to the Church.<sup>9</sup>

**Caveat 2:** While the Old Testament was written *for* the church (Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11), it was written *to* the people of Israel as God’s chosen nation. To rightly interpret the Old Testament requires observing and applying this distinction.

**Caveat 3:** While there are principles we can glean from the Old Testament, such principles devoid of covenantal awareness and redemptive-historical context will result in misguided applications.

From these three caveats, we must resist the urge to make a straight application of the Old Testament to the church today. Yet, this is what Rhodes has done—he has treated the Old Testament synchronically (i.e., a singular picture made up of many pixels), instead of diachronically (i.e., a story that unfolds with different covenant stipulations at different times in history). This inattention to covenantal context explains how he has misused Scripture.

Instead of appreciating the uniqueness of Israel’s relationship to God and to one another, Rhodes treats the Law of Moses and the examples of Israel as ethical principles that can be directly applied to the Church today.<sup>10</sup> The result is a pixelated approach that bends the biblical data, because it doesn’t consider that the corporate unity of the Old Testament is different than the various corporate unities that make up our modern world. Yet, as we will see there are many reasons in Scripture for why this is not the best way to read God’s Word. In what follows, I will look at (1) the Law of Moses, (2) the prayers of three Exiles (Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah), (3) the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and (4) the New Testament use of the Old.

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<sup>9</sup> I have made this point in a short essay entitled, “The Three Most Important Words I Learned in Seminary: ‘Textual, Epochal, Canonical’ *9Marks Journal* (March 2020), <https://www.9marks.org/article/the-three-most-important-words-i-learned-in-seminary-textual-epochal-canonical/>. A more technical discussion regarding the covenants and progressing from the old to the new can be found in Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *God’s Kingdom through God’s Covenants*, Second Edition (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

<sup>10</sup> I am sure he has categories for making distinctions, but they do not show up in his argument.

## The Law of Moses

The primary text for corporate confession in the Law of Moses is Leviticus 26:40–45. In Rhodes’ article, he cites this passage, highlights the need for “making amends” (Lev. 26:41b, 43), and goes on to cite Leviticus 25 and its Year of Jubilee as an example of corporate confession and making amends.

Arguing for the way that Jubilee was a legal custom to rectify oppression, he writes, “The Jubilee would often require the next generation to repent of the sins of their fathers by repairing the wrong that their fathers had committed.” His point may be valid in the context of Israel, but we should keep a couple things in mind: (1) It is debatable if Israel ever practiced the Year of Jubilee,<sup>11</sup> (2) when Jesus came announcing Jubilee in Luke 4:17–19, his message was centered on the *word* of the gospel, not the return of the land, and (3), even in principle, turning away from the sins of a previous generation is not the same thing as confessing sin as one’s own or repenting of their own sins. For these three reasons, it is uncertain how new covenant Christians can directly practice Jubilee. But it is certain that Jesus is the eschatological fulfillment of the Jubilee which began with the Day of Atonement.<sup>12</sup>

In the Law, Jubilee was clearly an old covenant custom, and one that Jesus used as a message for spiritual liberation, not economic sanctions or physical restoration. This lack of physical restoration stood at the heart of the confusion of his disciples and may have prompted some like Judas Iscariot to turn on Jesus because he did not reclaim the land for Israel. Thus, we need to tread carefully on using this passage as a proof-text for modern day Christians.<sup>13</sup> More to the point of this article, we need to see what Leviticus actually says about corporate confession. And that is found in Leviticus 26.

In Leviticus 26 we find a list of blessings and curses respective to Israel’s covenantal obedience or disobedience. Culminating these blessings and curses, verse 39 reads, “And those of you who are left shall rot away in your enemies’ lands *because of their iniquity*, and *also because of the iniquities of their fathers* they shall rot away like them.” This verse is important because it sets up the Levitical instruction for corporate confession in verses 40–45, and significantly it locates confession of sin in the present generation (“because of their iniquity”). Only then does it add previous generations to that confession (“because of the iniquities of their fathers”). This is a simple observation, but it proves decisive, as this “my-sins-first” confession will be a pattern that repeats throughout the Old Testament (e.g., Daniel 9, Ezra 9–10, Nehemiah 1). Before tracing those examples, however, we need to look more fully at Leviticus 26:40–45.

The final verses of Leviticus 26 presume a future disobedience for Israel, and they provide a way for the children of Israel to be reconciled to God through the confession of their iniquity, followed by confession for the “the iniquity of their fathers” (v. 40). In this verse, we find a clear order for confession—the present generation must confess their sin, *and only after they confess their sin* do they confess the sins of their fathers for breaking God’s covenant. In this way, Leviticus 26 cannot be used to say that we should simply confess the sins of our fathers. We must read it in context, and when we do, at least three points come to the surface.

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<sup>11</sup> If so, there is no record of it in the biblical canon.

<sup>12</sup> For a larger discussion of Leviticus 25 in the context of social justice, see Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church? Making Sense of Social Justice, Shalom, and the Great Commission* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 147–53.

<sup>13</sup> This is not to deny a future restoration of the land, but such a restoration will come when Christ returns and apportions his new creation to his people.

***First, this passage speaks of blessings and curses pertaining to the old covenant.***

Remember, the old covenant was a covenant rendered obsolete by the death and resurrection of Christ and is no longer in effect (Heb. 8:13). Because Christ died under the old covenant (9:14–16), bore these covenantal curses in his body (Gal. 3:13), and provided blessings to all under his new covenant (vv. 13–14), we cannot apply the blessings of Israel to the Church today without considering how Christ, as the mediator of a new covenant, changed everything.

Acknowledging differing opinions on Romans 11, God no longer relates to Israel as his covenant people. Likewise, the people of God no longer relate to one another according to the shared covenant made by a circumcision in the flesh (cf. Phil. 3:3). The Spirit is what binds Christians together today, and this has massive implications for the way we consider our corporate responsibilities and spiritual connections.

***Second, these blessings and curses are given to a particular people (Israel), living in a particular place (Canaan), enduring for a given set of time (until the time of Christ).***

This historical particularity of Leviticus is the first sign that this type of confession does not immediately apply outside of Israel’s covenant. Moreover, the connection to “their fathers” is more than an ancestral connection which all nations, tribes, and families possess. It is a covenantal connection that identifies Israelites to Abraham and also to the Exodus—not to mention God’s land promises to Israel.

When we read Leviticus 26:40–45, we see repeated references to Israel and God’s specific history with them. Yes, there was a mixed multitude that fled Egypt with Israel and were not biological heirs of Abraham (see Exod. 12:38), but this only strengthens the point. Israel was not defined by ethnicity or biological descent from Abraham; it was defined by God’s covenant with Abraham and carried forward by circumcision with the sons of Israel. Thus, the Law given to Abraham’s offspring (biological and adopted, we might say) cannot be directly applied to the church without recognizing some significant changes.

***Third, the promise of God’s remembrance is based upon confessing one’s own sins and then the sins of one’s covenantal predecessors.***

This present-to-past progression is entirely different from the corporate repentance called for by Rhodes and others. Today, they argue, the sin of racism is visited on the children of racists who are by extension racists or the guilty beneficiaries of racism. Without considering the actions of individuals, the white supremacy extant in the Jim Crow South is now passed to a new generation of white supremacists. Therefore, the ancestors of racists and others who have benefitted from racism, or racialization as Emerson and Smith put it in *Divided by Faith*, must confess the sin of their father’s.<sup>14</sup> (Tragically, this is even true for those whose ancestors did not live in places where chattel slavery and Jim Crow laws existed.)

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<sup>14</sup> *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford, 2000). My book *Dividing the Faithful: How a Little Book on Race Fractured a Movement Founded on Grace* (Douglasville, GA: G3 Press, 2023) responds to the redefinition of “racism,” which Emerson and Smith identify in the term “racialization.”

By contrast, Leviticus starts with the individual(s) who, recognizing their own sin, confess that sin and also acknowledge the way in which their heritage led to their sin. Even more, when we get to Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah, we will find three confessors who are suffering in exile because of their fathers sins. Today, for reasons we will consider in Jeremiah and Ezekiel, this covenantal judgment no longer applies. Even in Israel, we should acknowledge a distinction between “the *long-term* effects of sin and the *judicial guilt* for sin.”<sup>15</sup> As Owen Strachan observes, with respect to Deuteronomy 5:9–10 and the stipulation that God will “visit the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation,”

The argument made by some is that [Deut. 5:9–10] teaches us that successive generations bear guilt for the sins of their ancestors. At first blush, this passage could seem to teach such a concept. But on closer analysis, we must distinguish here between the *long-term* effects of sin and the *judicial guilt* for sin. This passage does not teach that future generations are judicially guilty for ancestral sin. Instead, it teaches us that pursuing idolatry will yield long-term effects. Descendants will not bear guilt for ancestral idolatry as if they committed it, but they will feel the effects of it. We see this happen in vivid form after David commits adultery with Bathsheba and has her husband, Uriah, placed in a battlefield killing zone. He loses his kingdom, and the loss of the kingdom affects many people for a good long time. Yet though his children suffer the *effects* of David's sin, they are not *judicially guilty* for it.

Indeed, the guilt of the fathers is not passed onto the next generation the way it was between Adam and the human race (see Rom. 5:12–21), but the bitterness of the sin (i.e., “the children’s teeth are set on edge”) is passed on in its effects. Similarly, there are instances when guilt *is* passed on, but the reason is found in children actively imitating their fathers. For instance, Amnon violated his sister Tamar in a manner reminiscent of David violating Bathsheba (2 Samuel 11 and 13), and Amon walked in the idolatrous ways of his father Manasseh (2 Chron. 33:21–25). At the same time, the converse also happened, as Josiah led Israel to revival, turning away from his father Amon’s wickedness. In short, while the blessings and curses of Israel were mediated by the fathers of Israel, there remained a proper sense of personal responsibility before God, as we see in the pattern of confession in Leviticus. First, the sinner confessed their own sin, and then they would confess the sins of those who have gone before them. This is the pattern we see in Leviticus and it is the one we find in the prayers of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah.

### **The Prayers of Daniel, Ezra, and Nehemiah**

If observing the order of the confession in Leviticus 26 did not seem like a key point, we must recall that in Scripture every detail matters. Jesus can argue a theological point based on the difference between past and present verb tense (see Matt. 22:32). Paul can argue a theological point based upon the chronology of the promise and the law (Gal. 4:17). So here, we will see that in every case of corporate confession among the exilic confessors, their confession begins in the present and work backwards to previous generations—just like Leviticus 26:39–40 instructed.

**Daniel 9.** In Daniel 9, the elderly Daniel is made aware by reading Jeremiah that the time of the exile is coming to an end (vv. 1–3). In response he offers a public confession for all of the

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<sup>15</sup>Owen Strachan, *Christianity and Wokeness* (Washington, D.C.: Salem Books, 2021), 94.



nation—those in exile and those in Jerusalem. And like we saw in Leviticus 26, he begins by confessing the sin of his generation *and then* he confesses the sins of those who have gone before him. First, in verse 5, he prays, “we have sinned and done wrong and acted wickedly and rebelled, turning aside from your commandments and rules.” He continues in verse 6, where he includes a list of the disobedient. “We have not listened to your servants the prophets, who spoke in your name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land” (cf. vv. 8, 16).

Importantly, in Daniel’s prayer, it is not the guilt of his covenantal predecessors that prompts his confession. Rather, it is his own sense of guilt (after reading God’s Word in Jeremiah) that leads him to pray. As he prays and remembers the covenant faithfulness of Yahweh, he confesses the sins of his ancestors (see vv. 6, 8, 16), but notably his confession is for the present, not the past. Twice, he says, “as at this day” (vv. 7, 15), indicating the contemporary need for confession. Moreover, he concludes, “While I was speaking and praying, *confessing my sin* and the sins of my people Israel . . .” (v. 20).

While someone could argue that his personal confession comes because of his association with Israel, it is more theologically correct for Daniel to understand himself as a sinner before God who needs atonement and pardon. Thus, he prays for God to forgive his generation for their covenant unfaithfulness, an unfaithfulness that led to the exile, continued through the exile, and needed confession in Daniel’s day.

For our purposes, we learn that Daniel does not simply confess the sins of his forefathers. He confesses his sins, as a part of a God’s covenant people. Moreover, spending seven decades in exile for the sins of his fathers, this passage is related to an old covenant circumstance that is no longer applicable because of Christ’s finished work on the cross. Certainly, Daniel has much to teach us about prayer and confession, but only if we recognize the covenantal differences.

**Ezra 9–10.** The covenantal differences between modern Christians and Old Testament saints also apply to Ezra 9–10. In this passage, Ezra the priest intercedes on behalf of the nation. Responding to the crisis of the priests and Levites marrying foreign women (9:1–5), Ezra addresses God and prays for forgiveness (vv. 6–15). He begins his prayer, confessing the sins of his people, and then moves backwards in time.

“O my God, I am ashamed and blush to lift my face to you, my God, for our iniquities have risen higher than our heads, and our guilt has mounted up to the heavens. From the days of our fathers to this day we have been in great guilt. And for our iniquities we, our kings, and our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity, to plundering, and to utter shame, as it is today. (Ezra 9:6–7)

In his prayer, Ezra’s confession is for the sins of his fellow priests and Levites, which puts them in league with previous unfaithful priests and Levites (e.g., Aaron, Korah, etc.). Knowing how God disciplined (unto death) the house of Levi in the past, he prays for forgiveness in the present. Again, the order is important. It is not reflection of past sins that leads him to confession, it is sin in the present that prompts prayer, and previous history adds to the weight of his sin. This is a significant point: there is a place for learning from history and seeing the magnitude of our sins in the light of history (see e.g., 1 Cor. 10:1–13). In fact, studying the history of Israel, or church history, may even highlight our own transgression. But there is an important difference between the Holy Spirit using history to convict us of our sin and

confessing the sins of a previous generation because we feel bad about them. The former is the convicting work of the Spirit; the latter moves closer to the “sin of empathy,” as Joe Rigney has termed it.

Additionally, the old covenant joins a people spiritually and politically. In Israel, the offspring of Abraham are not just worshipers of the same God; they are also citizens of the same nation-state. By contrast, the new covenant separates church and state, even if a particular nation possesses a state church. Biblically-speaking, to be a part of God’s covenant is not attached to any earthly nation, which means that the sins of a nation do not necessarily attach to an individual, as they did in Israel. Americans, while citizens bound together by law (local, state, and federal) are not joined together by a divine covenant. Moreover, the churches in America are not in covenant with the state, as it might be in the Church of Scotland. We will consider this more below, but for now we need to appreciate the discontinuity between Ezra 9–10 and today.

The sins of a nation, even if we permit that identification, are not the same as the sins of Israel, a nation whose past, present, and future all depended on salvation of God. Accordingly, the consequences of America’s sin and the consequences of Israel’s sin are not identical. Even if we grant that God does judge nations as nations—see, for instance, his judgment of the Amorites (Gen. 15:16; cf. Lev. 18:24–25; 20:22), Assyria (Isaiah 10), and Babylon (Jeremiah 50), discontinuity between Israel and every other nation remains.

Indeed, with the coming of Christ, all that God does with the nations should be recognized as a means of delivering elect sinners from every nation. Thus, within every nation there are children of God whose sins have been covered by the blood of Christ. And even if the elect experience the fate of their wicked nation, God’s purposes for his children are fundamentally different from his enemies. And it is this difference, stipulated by his biblical covenants, that explain why passages like Ezra 9–10 do not directly apply today.

Until we recognize the way biblical covenants divide and unite people, we will misapply the Scriptures to questions of race and ethnicity.<sup>16</sup> God’s Word does more than answer our questions about ethnic partiality and the enduring effects of ethnic hostility, it also gives us new questions to answer. Moreover, as long as we fail to establish what real (read: covenantal) connection there is between a person today and some group from the past, we will pressure people to confess sins that may not be legitimately “theirs.” Furthermore, because the transmission of generational guilt fails to acknowledge the finished work of Christ and the radical break God’s elect have with the world and their respective ancestors, such demands for confessing the sins of a particular group, especially a group that is based on skin color, undermines the power and purpose of the cross.

Returning to Ezra, we find that both Ezra’s confession (ch. 9) and priestly instruction (ch. 10) are based upon the stipulations of the covenant union found in Israel. This is important for rightly applying God’s Word and for avoiding moral imperatives which Scripture does not clearly support. Truly, until we see corporate confession through the lens of Scripture’s multiple covenants, we will misapply the text of Scripture to ourselves. Hence, we need to continue to understand Scripture on its own terms.

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<sup>16</sup> This is most dramatically seen in a passage like Ephesians 2:14–17. While Ephesians 2 is the *locus classicus* for the discussions on “racial reconciliation,” it is actually a passage about the old and new covenants. Thus, immediate application of Ephesians 2 to questions of ethnic reconciliation misses the point of the passage, which in turn undermines the message of the gospel as well as its power to save.

**Nehemiah 1.** In Nehemiah 1, the Jewish cupbearer serving the king of Persia offers a corporate prayer of repentance, and when he does, he again mentions himself and his generation first. Only then does he address his father's house. In verse 6, Nehemiah prays, "Let your ear be attentive and your eyes open, to hear the prayer of your servant that I now pray before you day and night for the people of Israel your servants, confessing the sins of the people of Israel, which we have sinned against you. Even I and my father's house have sinned." Like Daniel and Ezra, Nehemiah follows the pattern of Leviticus 26.

We do not need to labor the point, other than to confirm that corporate confession begins with an acknowledge of sin in the present. Only then does it move to the past. Moreover, the connection that Nehemiah, Daniel, and Ezra demonstrate is one that comes from their shared inheritance in Israel—an inheritance that is delineated by the covenant. Thus, while the confession is also familial and national, in Israel these connections are fundamentally covenantal.

Today, these connections are different. To be an American does not put us in covenantal union with Americans in the past. Millions are the European immigrants who came to America after slavery ended. And having white, brown, or black skin doesn't necessarily make a covenantal union with others who share the same level of melanin. Even if we tried to make the case that a group of modern persons (e.g., whites living in Georgia) benefitted in some tangible way from whites in Georgia exploiting of another group (e.g., black slaves), it would be difficult to precisely determine the injustices to a degree that would justly right the historic wrongs.

Again, seeking to avoid forays into abstract, cosmic justice, we should let Scripture direct all our steps, even if that means it teaches us that we are too finite and ignorant to resolve all the sins of the past. In truth, if we are going to be biblical about the corporate confession of sin, we must think covenantally about the world and our place in it. To that end, we turn to the Prophets, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who give us help transitioning from the old covenant to the new.

## **The Prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel**

To bring in another article on this subject, let me mention the blogpost by Kyle Dillon who addresses the same question as Michael Rhodes. In his TGC post, "Are We Held Accountable for the Sins of Our Forefathers?"<sup>17</sup> he argues there are two principles of judgment at work in the Old Testament: "Individual Judgment" and "Generational Judgment." He highlights the place of both in the Law and the Prophets (see e.g., Exod. 20:5–6; 34:7; Deut. 24:16; Ezek. 18:1–20; Jer. 32:18) and argues that "we have to discern how they can be compatible with each other—and what they mean for us today."

For help he turns to the Reformed divine, Francis Turretin (1623–87) who discusses three ways guilt or righteousness can be imputed one to another. Summarizing Turretin, Dillon writes, "This connection can be: (1) *natural*, as a father to a child, (2) *federal*, as a king to his subjects, or (3) *voluntary*, as between friends." In Scripture we find multiple examples of sins being imputed to another. As Dillon observes, "Lamentations recognizes the exile as a generational judgment: "Our fathers sinned, and are no more; and we bear their iniquities" (Lam. 5:7)." Then he cites numerous "Old Testament examples of children falling under the judgment of their fathers":

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<sup>17</sup> Kyle Dillon, "Are We Held Accountable for the Sins of Our Forefathers?" The Gospel Coalition, August 3, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/sins-forefathers-accountable/>.

the generation of Noah (Gen. 7:21); Sodom and Gomorrah (Gen. 19:24–25); Achan (Josh. 7:24–25); the Amalekites (1 Sam. 15:2–3); the sons of Saul (2 Sam. 21:6–9); Jeroboam (1 Kings 14:9–10); Ahab (1 Kings 21:21–22); and many others. Additionally, we find corporate prayers of confession offered for sins committed by previous generations (Dan. 9:4–19; Ezra 9:6–7).

At the end of this list, Dillon returns to the prayers we considered above, and he appears to prove the point that imputed guilt is a well-grounded biblical principle. Yet, it is here that I want to observe what he does not—namely, that the imputation of guilt in all of his cases are tied to covenantal and familial connections. His examples are entirely derived from the Old Testament, where covenants were formed on the basis of a genealogical principle, not the new birth (cf. John 3:3–8). Therefore, we must take caution in making one-to-one comparisons as we move from the old covenant to the new.

Moreover, we cannot simply “balance” two principles of judgment—individual and generational—with some type of pixelated approach. Though Dillon does not use Rhode’s word-picture of pixelation, his portrayal of judgment remains “pixelated” (and synchronic). Instead of recognizing the unfolding drama of the covenants in Scripture, that necessarily changes the membership of covenant from flesh to spirit, Dillon attempts to balance two apparently contradictory principles.

The error in this is not found in trying to interpret Scripture with Scripture. Instead, it stems from the fact that the new covenant is organized differently than the old. While church and state run together under the covenants with Abraham, Israel, and David, the church and state are divided in the new covenant, which means that the way Christians relate to each sphere of sovereignty is different, and more importantly, guilt by association is also different.

We will consider what the New Testament teaches about corporate responsibility below, but for now in the Prophets, we need to see how Ezekiel and Jeremiah recognize the change from a covenant where children suffer the consequences of their fathers sins to a covenant where every person stands as a priest in God’s house (i.e., what we know as the priesthood of believers).

**Ezekiel 18.** After discussing a new everlasting covenant (Ezek. 16:59–63) and promising Israel a replanting after their exile (Ezekiel 17), the word of the LORD comes to Ezekiel again saying,

What do you mean by repeating this proverb concerning the land of Israel, ‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge’? As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb shall no more be used by you in Israel. Behold, all souls are mine; the soul of the father as well as the soul of the son is mine: the soul who sins shall die. (vv. 2–4)

These verses consider a proverb in Israel that characterizes the “generational judgment” of God on Israel (cf. Exod. 20:5–6; 34:7). And here the LORD declares that this proverb will no longer be valid. Why? Because he will no longer pass on the effects of the father’s sins onto their sons. And what will bring the change? Namely, a new covenant.

In Ezekiel 18, the content of the chapter is about how God will judge individuals for their own righteousness or injustice. Yet, in the two chapters preceding Ezekiel 18, we discover what

Ezekiel calls an everlasting covenant. Likewise, at the end of Ezekiel 18, we know that a new covenant is in view because of the concluding imperative: “Cast away from you all the transgressions that you have committed, and *make yourselves a new heart and a new spirit!* Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I have no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Lord GOD; so turn, and live” (vv. 31–32). In application, this is an impossible command. No Israelite can make a new heart, find a new spirit, or turn and live. But in the new covenant, which Ezekiel describes in chapters 11 and 36, he lists the gift of a new heart and a new spirit as foundational for the new covenant. Thus, in the command for a new heart in Ezekiel 18:31, he is referencing the need that the new covenant supplies.

Put all this together and we find that Ezekiel 18 is not merely balancing a principle of generational judgment with one of personal judgment. Instead, it is demonstrating a shift in the way that God treated his people. As verse 3 states, “As I live, declares the Lord GOD, this proverb *shall no more be used* by you in Israel.” This verse indicates a change that will come into effect when the new covenant arrives.

**Jeremiah 31.** Continuing with the theme of new covenant, Jeremiah 31 also discusses the proverb that “the fathers eat sour grapes and the children’s teeth are set on edge.” In verses 29–30, the two verses that stand before, the new covenant passage in vv. 31–34, we find these words,

In those days they shall no longer say: “‘The fathers have eaten sour grapes, and the children’s teeth are set on edge.’ But everyone shall die for his own iniquity. Each man who eats sour grapes, his teeth shall be set on edge.

The point of Jeremiah is the same as Ezekiel: a day is soon coming (and has now come in Christ) when the principle of judgment will shift from fathers and their children to every individual. And when will that occur? And what will make the difference? Again, it is the introduction of the new covenant.

As Jeremiah 31:34 says, “No longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.” This verse indicates a shift in the structure of the covenant. Whereas, the people of Israel depended upon priests to introduce them to the Lord (see Mal. 2:1–9), the people of the new covenant will all know the Lord and will all, in a manner of speaking, be priests to one another.

This change not only affects the role of priests; it also indicates that every person now stands accountable as an individual before God, because under the new covenant every individual has direct access to God in Christ. Whereas the old covenant saints had a series of temple mediators standing between them and God, now every child of God born by the Spirit is directly accountable to God, just as God is accessible to all his children. For this reason, judgment is based upon an individual’s standing before God and not the standing of their father, grandfather, or great-grandfather.

Now, we should be really clear about something. Before the new covenant, the Law did speak of individual judgment. In Deuteronomy 24:16, the principle of an individual’s standing before God is stated: “Fathers shall not be put to death because of their children, nor shall children be put to death because of their fathers. *Each one shall be put to death for his own sin.*” Because this principle of individual judgment is more clearly articulated in Ezekiel 18 and

Jeremiah 31, this verse led some critical scholars to date Deuteronomy (or at least this verse) as a late.<sup>18</sup>

It is better to understand Deuteronomy 24:16, however, not as a late addition to the Law, but a principle of individual accountability built into the law from the beginning. As we noted previously, this principle of individualism is embedded in a covenantal framework, where the effects, not the guilt, of the father's sins are visited upon their children.<sup>19</sup> In some cases, as with Achan (Joshua 7) and Korah (Numbers 16), the judgment falls heavily on the household of covenant-breakers. In such cases, the effects of Achan's stolen booty and Korah's rebellion were felt by their children, even as other children ("the sons of Korah") escaped. Nevertheless, the old covenant instances still bear dissimilarities from the new covenant.

In other cases, as in the death of Saul's seven sons for his covenant-breaking (2 Samuel 21), we find an instance of David measuring out justice at the request of the Gibeonites. This may be justified, but there is also evidence that David failed to seek the Lord in his judgments, just like Israel failed to seek the Lord previously with the Gibeonites (Joshua 9).<sup>20</sup> If this interpretation is accurate, it makes this passage less viable for assigning guilt to the next generation.

In either case, there remains in Israel a covenantal unity in the circumcised sons of Israel that is different than the church who is circumcised in the heart. This difference does not wholly eradicate corporate guilt for new covenant Christians, but it does require a diachronic reading of Scripture. Making this point more clearly, we can look at Jeremiah 32.

**Jeremiah 32.** Considering the argument of Kyle Dillon again, he lists Jeremiah 32:18 as a complementary and contrasting verse to Jeremiah 31:29–30. That verse reads, "You show steadfast love to thousands, *but you repay the guilt of fathers to their children after them*, O great and mighty God, whose name is the LORD of hosts." From this verse and Jeremiah 31, he believes that "Jeremiah seems to set forth two contradictory principles."

That's one way to read it, if we read these verses by themselves. But as soon as we read the context of Jeremiah 32, we see that verse 18 is rehearsing the principle that stood throughout Israel's history, that the consequences of the fathers are passed to their children because of the nature of the old covenant. Though Jeremiah 31–34 describe the new covenant, Jeremiah 32:1–25 is an historical account of Israel, leading up to Jeremiah's decision to buy a plot of ground in Israel—an act of faith that reveals the ongoing nature of the old covenant, even after the exile.

As the Prophets foretell and the New Testament confirms, Israel returned from exile under the old covenant. Only when Christ came did the change in covenants become something more than a renewal. In Christ, he inaugurated an entirely new way for sinners to relate to God.

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<sup>18</sup> See Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 323.

<sup>19</sup> Alternatively, Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity: Why Following Jesus Does Not Mean You Have to Change the World, Be an Expert in Everything, Accept Spiritual Failure, and Feel Miserable Pretty Much All the Time* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023), 87, writes of Deuteronomy 24:16, "It was never the case that children, regardless of how they lived, were to be punished for their father's sins."

<sup>20</sup> John L. Mackay, "1–2 Samuel" in *ESV Expository Commentary*, vol. 3 (ed. Iain Duguid, James M. Hamilton, Jr., and Jay Sklar; Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2019), 451, observes, "David apparently repeats the error of Israel of Joshua's day in their dealings with the Gibeonites, when they 'did not ask counsel from the Lord' (Josh. 9:14)." And again, "In accepting the Gibeonites' petition, David implements contemporary cultural norms associate with blood feuds that contravene divine law. . . . To execute seven of Saul's sons for an offense he committed breaches in this principle [Deut. 24:16]" (ibid., 453).

This new covenant was foretold and foreshadowed in the covenants of Israel, but they were not the same. And thus to rightly understand how to read the Scripture with respect to God's covenant people and the place of corporate confession, we must take into consideration the progressive unfolding of covenants in the Bible.

Neither Michael Rhodes and Kyle Dillon do that, and as a result they offer a synchronic reading of Scripture that results in a misapplication of the Old Testament prayers of confession to new covenant Christians. This misreading may have to do with their covenantal commitments as Presbyterians, but I do not think this is the only matter to consider. There are Baptists too, who fail to appreciate the differences between old and new covenants and make synchronic arguments from Scripture, especially when it comes to ethics.

These synchronic arguments appear to be biblical and balanced because they involve many and varied passages of Scripture, but without attending the framework of the whole Bible, they mislead their readers. This the point I am demonstrating here, that direct application of corporate confession in Israel fails to consider how the New Testament applies these passages to Christ and the Church. And they fail to consider what the New Testament teaches about the corporate nature of confession, as well. To that question of what the New Testament says about corporate confession, we now turn.

## **Confession in the New Testament**

In the New Testament, we find only a few mentions of confession and no model prayers of confession. Instead, most uses of the verb “confess” (*homolegeō*) depict believers expressing faith in Christ, sometimes without even using the word (as in Peter's confession that Jesus is the Christ).<sup>21</sup> That being said, the New Testament does include instances of confessing (*exomolegeō*) sin. Most of these are individuals confessing their own sins as the Spirit convicts them and they turn towards the Lord in repentance. Yet, in some instances we do find corporate confessions. Still, there is nothing in the New Testament like what we find with Daniel, Ezra, or Nehemiah. In the New Testament, after Acts 1–2 at least, the saints are not exiled from God and thus they enjoy communion with him, even as they put must sin to death (see Romans 6, 8). With these new covenant realities in mind, we need to consider six instances of confession in the New Testament.

### **1. Confessing Sins with John the Baptist**

The first place we find confession of sin is at the Jordan River, when John baptizes men and women for the forgiveness of sins. As Matthew 3:5–6 reports it, “Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region about the Jordan were going out to him, and they were baptized by him

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<sup>21</sup> Here is a quick survey of the places where we see Christians confessing Christ and the good news of the gospel. First, although the word is not used, Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ (Matt. 16:13; Mark 8:27–30; Luke 9:18–20), a confession that would invite the scorn of the Pharisees and removal from the synagogue (John 9:22). In Paul's letters, he says that salvation comes from confessing Christ as Lord (Rom. 10:9–10; cf. Acts 24:14), as does obedient service and submission (2 Cor. 9:13). Looking to the future, Paul says that one day everyone will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord (Phil. 2:11; cf. Rom. 14:11). Paul also speaks of confessing the mystery of godliness, which is followed by six gospel truths (1 Tim. 3:15–16; cf. 6:12, 13). Hebrews twice speaks of holding fast to our confession (4:14; 10:23), a testimony of faith in Christ our great high priest (3:1–2). Last, John defines believers as those who confess Christ (1 John 2:23; 4:2, 3, 15), versus deceivers are those who do not confess Christ (2 John 7).

in the river Jordan, *confessing their sins*.” This is one of the few places where we see a group of people confessing sin in the New Testament and importantly they are confessing their own sins and not the sins of their fathers. Moreover, this confession is technically occurring under the period of the old covenant.

## **2. The Lord’s Prayer**

The next place we find sins being confessed is in the Lord’s Prayer. As Jesus instructs his disciples to pray, he teaches them the famous words which begin “*Our Father, who art in heaven*.” In this corporate prayer, he includes, “forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matt. 6:10; cf. Luke 11:4). Notably, this prayer is not for individuals; it does not say “forgive me my sins.” Rather, it is a corporate prayer and hence a corporate acknowledgement of sin. Given to his disciples, Jesus is teaching them how to pray together and confess sin. But again, there is nothing here about confessing the sins of others or identifying ourselves with the sins of past generations.

Let me offer a reason for this. As we will see, the weight of confession in the New Testament is on the side of confessing Jesus as the Christ, it is probable to understand the confession of personal sin as an acknowledgment of one’s personal need for forgiveness and the finished work of Christ for all those who have gone before us. In other words, new covenant Christians will not suffer the exile from the land the way old covenant saints did. Whereas Israelite children could be cast out of the land because of their fathers’ sins, new covenant saints enjoy the indwelling presence of God and the promise that God in the Spirit of Christ will never leave them or forsake them.

With that in mind, it is not necessary to confess the sins of previous generations. Our standing with God does not depend on other generations or our place in the land (like it did in Israel). Instead, our standing before God depends upon how we respond to Christ. Yes, we are individuals who share in the covenant with others and others may impact us and even tempt us to sin, but because of the new nature of Christ’s redemption, Christ teaches us to confess the sins which the Holy Spirit brings to mind. The work of the Spirit does not convict us of the sins of others; he convicts us of our sins. To impose the guilt of others on ourselves, would be to reapply the old covenant and not to confess the finished work of Christ.

## **3. Confessing in Revival**

Another instance of corporate confession is found in Acts 19:18, when the idol-destroying, newborn saints of Ephesus are confessing their pagan magic as sin. In the context of a city wide revival, Luke writes, “Also many of those who were now believers came, confessing and divulging their practices.” This is the closest thing to an Ezra-like confession in the New Testament. In response to the work of the Spirit and the gift of repentance, these new believers confess their sins. Notably, they don’t confess the idolatry of their ancestors. Rather, they confess their sins, as new creatures in Christ.

## **4. James’s Commands to Mourn and Confess**

The only book that commands confession of sins is the Epistle of James. And in two passages, we find instructions for mourning for sin and confessing sin one to another. In the first,



James 4:5–10 speaks to believers about how to treat their sin. In response to the power and prompting of the Holy Spirit (v. 5), James says that God gives more grace. This grace empowers believers to draw near to God and to “cleanse your hands, . . . purify your hearts . . . be wretched and mourn and weep” (vv. 8–9).

In these instructions, he employs imagery and actions familiar to the Old Testament saints. This indicates that what we saw in contrition of the prophets and men like Ezra and Nehemiah continue to be appropriate. But instead of rending garments, like the old covenant priests, priests of the new covenant (i.e., saints) are to rend their hearts, confessing their sins. Importantly, James says nothing about confessing the sins of previous generations. Instead, he calls all Christians to confess their sins and to confess their sins to one another (James 5:16)—presumably, because every believer now functions as a priest who can approach the throne of grace and intercede for one another.

In the end, James teaches us that modern Christians should mourn over their sin and confess their sins to one another. We should, for instance, take up the Psalms of lament and corporate confession, but we should do so as new covenant saints! There is nothing in James’s instructions to suggest that Christians of one generation should confess the sins of those in a previous generation. In fact, to do so would deny the righteousness that comes by faith in Christ and the full forgiveness that is found in him.

## **5. If We Confess *Our* Sins**

The final place in the New Testament where confession of sins is mentioned is 1 John 1:9. In this familiar verse, John writes, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.” Again, the pronouns are in the plural, which could suggest a corporate confession (all individuals confessing together), or collectively (all individuals by themselves), or both. Whatever view is taken, the point in context is that everyone is a sinner and that everyone who confesses their sin will enjoy God’s justifying grace and cleansing. But this again is for one’s own sins, not for the sins of others, especially those who have gone before us.

## **6. The Confessing Church**

One more passage is worthy of mention. In Revelation 2–3, Jesus confronts the sins of seven churches. In these seven letters, he both commends and condemns the actions of their covenant communities. From his recognition of their corporate solidarity, which comes from their standing in Christ, he can address habits of heart and life that these churches share. In other words, he is not just calling for individual confession, but corporate confession. Still, in this corporate confession, Jesus is speaking to churches who are immediately affected by sins in their midst. Jesus is not importing sins from a previous generation or century; he is addressing contemporary sins. And I would suggest these seven letters may provide some of the best light for understanding how churches, as local assemblies of the new covenant, should repent of their sins.

## **Summarizing the New Testament**

All told, the New Testament offers a uniform testimony about confessing sin. First, it is necessary and ongoing, but it is always personal and present. Second, confession in the New Testament is different from the Old Testament. In the wake of Christ's finished work, our confession is not gaining a place for us in the land, as it did in the Old Testament. Rather, in the New Testament, confession is offered with thanksgiving. Because we have access to draw near to the presence of God at the throne of grace, and because we have an inheritance that cannot spoil, perish, or fade, our prayers are effective and do not need to rehearse the sins of the past.

Like the saints of old, we can learn from the past and mourn over *our* sins as we see this truth expressed in history: "all have sinned and fallen short of God's glory" (Rom. 3:23). Yet, the point of corporate confession in the New Testament is manifestly not to dredge up sins from the past or to assign guilt from previous generations to our own. To do that is to minimize the work of Christ's cross and to call the Spirit to convict of sin in ways that go beyond the scope of what Scripture says about the Spirit.

So, here is an important but culturally unpleasant truth: If previous generations of Christians, honest-to-goodness, born-again Christians, have sinned—even by way of ethnic animosity, partiality, slavery, oppression, or anything else—we must declare, based upon what we know of the gospel that their sins were and are forgiven because of the blood of Christ. We do damage to the gospel, and promote a politically correct form of purgatory, if we the living must confess the sins of the dead. In Christ's death and in the deaths of those saints who have gone before us, all the sins of ethnic partiality and hostility have been dealt with and do not need further atonement or confession. *Jesus has paid it all! All to him we all owe!*

At the same time, if false professors in the past have sullied the Christian church with their ethnic pride—and many have!— we do not need to confess their sins either. Why? Because their sins have been and will be judged before the throne of God and eternally in the hell of fire. Again, in the Old Testament, Israel did not have a high priest sitting at God's right hand, hence later generations in Israel had to request forgiveness for sins left unpardoned. This is the logic of Romans 3:25, which tells us that God previously overlooked "former sins" until Christ could make the full payment.

Now, however, all sins have been and will be dealt with in Christ's salvation and judgment. For that reason, we do not need to confess the sins of previous generations, nor can we! What we need to do is to learn from those who have gone before us and confess our own sins, as we walk in holiness before God. To that end, let me now offer three ways in which corporate confession might be applied today.

## **A Better Approach**

If the Old Testament does not apply directly to Christians today (for reasons outlined above), is there still a way in which the Old and New Testaments inform the way we think about corporate confession? Yes, when we consider three things: (1) moral proximity *and* moral agency, (2) local (church) accountability, and (3) confession in proportion to personal knowledge and involvement. I will consider each to provide a few constructive guidelines for practicing new covenant, corporate confession.

*First, moral proximity and moral agency provide general guidance for evaluating culpability for sin.* If we can agree that the only thing Christians must confess and seek forgiveness for is sin (as defined in Scripture), then, in addition to the biblical indictment of that sin, we must have a Spirit-born conviction that we were active participants in that sin. As this

paper has argued, such participation in sin cannot be assumed, it must be proven, or at least provable. And it must be proven on the basis of real culpability. The argument that a person is an oppressor because they are white, male, or heterosexual does not hold up when compared to Scripture. And as I have sought to argue from the biblical covenants, corporate participation is different in the new covenant than it was under the old covenant.

At the same time, just because the new covenant joins individuals to God in Christ without another human mediator (i.e., a Levitical priest), does not mean that groups of Christians cannot sin together, nor that one can pray for God's mercy for his sin and the sins of his group. Similarly, just because Critical Race Theory and Intersectionality are unbiblical ways to categorize the world does not mean that all sins are strictly individual. The Lord's Prayer teaches us to pray, "Our Father . . . forgive us our transgressions." Moreover, there are corporate sins and even systems of injustice that can ensnare Christians. Still, the question becomes, how can we rightly discern whether or when it is right to confess the sins of a group? My answer to that question brings us to its moral proximity and moral agency.

Addressing moral proximity with respect to doing justice and caring for the poor, Kevin DeYoung and Greg Gilbert identify how Scripture draws concentric circles of responsibility around a person. They write,

In the Old Testament, for example, the greatest responsibility was to one's own family, then to the tribe, then to fellow Israelites, and finally to other nations. From Jubilee laws to kinsman redeemers, the ideal was for the family to help out first. They had the greatest obligation. After all, as Paul says, if you don't provide for your family, when you can, you are worse than an unbeliever (1 Tim. 5:8). If family can't help, the circle expands. Those closest to the person or situation should respond before outside persons or organizations do. The reason the rich man is so despicable in Luke 16 is the same reason the priest and the Levite in Luke 10 are such an embarrassment: they have a need right in front of them, with the power to help, and they do nothing.<sup>22</sup>

From this line of thinking, we can begin to see that sinful behavior also depends upon moral proximity. Those who are closest to ethnic discrimination and hostility are the most responsible for rectifying the wrong. For instance, a local schoolboard has a responsibility to discipline one of their high school coaches for using ethnic slurs, but they don't have responsibility for disciplining the college football coach in the same town for doing the same thing, even if his track record is longer and his place of influence is greater. Why? The reason is proximity, as well as authority. Those who have supervision over a given workspace, school, or church have greater moral responsibility, for they not only have proximity but also authority to protect the innocent and promote the good. Thus, failure to do those things, when it is the power of the individual or group to do so is a sin of omission and one that deserves repentance.

Still, such moral proximity requires another consideration, namely moral agency. Those who have actively endangered or exploited someone else due to skin color, ethnicity, or any other bias are not simply proximate to the injustice, they are also guilty agents. And, according to Scripture, they need to confess their sin, turn from those thoughts and actions, and do all they can to repair the damage of their ethnic pride and hostility. Indeed, if confession is a testimony to one's own sinfulness and a petition for God's mercy and the mercy of others, it is important that the confession is not just a matter of proximity, but of agency. The former alone (proximity) is

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<sup>22</sup> DeYoung and Gilbert, *What is the Mission of the Church*, 184.

what a therapeutic worldview may invite—we confess sin because we feel bad. But the latter (agency) is what a biblical worldview demands—we confess sin because we are bad and have done wrong. Such wrongdoing may have been passed down to us from our forefathers (see 1 Pet. 1:18), but ultimately, Spirit-led confession must admit our own sins and not just the sins of others.

In this way, moral proximity is the beginning of corporate confession but it must include moral agency and personal acknowledgement of wrongdoing. In fact, we saw this principle in action in Leviticus 26, Daniel 9, Ezra 9–10, and Nehemiah 1, as each instance began with the sin of the confessor. Such personal ownership is radically counter-cultural today. For individuals are condemned for their group identity and they also gain credibility for confessing the sins of their group. Unfortunately, in our therapeutic age, such a confession is little more than aesthetic, virtue signaling. By contrast, biblical confession comes from a heart overwhelmed with guilt for personal wrongdoing (see Psalm 51) and gratitude for the pardon offered by the gospel (see also Psalm 51). As we call for corporate confession, we need to keep these distinctions in mind and always pursue confession of sin in the way Scripture prescribes.

*Second, the principle of moral proximity and moral agency may best apply to local churches, not the universal church.* In the New Testament, the church of Jesus Christ can be understood in universal terms (e.g., the bride of Christ) or in local terms (e.g., the church of God in Corinth). Of the 114 uses of *ekklēsia* in the New Testament, most of them relate to the local church.<sup>23</sup> When Jesus assigned church discipline in Matthew 18:15–17, it was aimed at local assemblies of God’s people. Similarly, when Jesus spoke to the universal church in Revelation 2–3, he did so by addressing the seven churches of Asia Minor. In between the Gospels and Revelation, local churches are given instructions on how to conduct themselves (see e.g., 1 Tim. 3:15).

The stress on the local church is important, and it is reinforced by the fact that pastors are given to local churches, ordinances are conducted in local churches, and spiritual gifts are given to build up local churches. Without denying the ways that some Christians impact the church universal, the life of the Christian is found in the local church. And participation in the universal church is experienced through membership in a local church.<sup>24</sup>

With this understanding of the local church in place, we can begin to assess where to focus our attention for corporate confessions. If Christians participate in God’s church by way of local assemblies, then he or she is morally proximate to the local church, but he or she is not proximate to Christ’s universal church. Or at least, he or she is only proximate to tiny fraction of the whole body of Christ living on earth—what we might call the church militant.

Practically speaking, what the church in Australia or Zimbabwe does is not something for which an American Christian is morally culpable or responsible to change. Indeed, what an individual does in Albania is not something that must be attended by the church residing in Zurich—unless the individual in question is a member of the church in Zurich, traveling in Albania. By this line of thinking, however, it is equally the case that a Christian in America is

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<sup>23</sup> On the spatio-temporal nature of the church, see Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 148–57.

<sup>24</sup> On this point, I have argued that local churches are the means by which individual Christians experience life in the universal church: <https://davidschrock.com/2016/11/11/the-local-church-houses-a-certain-kind-of-people-members-of-christs-eschatological-gathering/>

not responsible for the church in America. Why? Because as it stands, there is no single church in America. There are only churches, in the plural.<sup>25</sup>

As Paul addresses the church in Galatia, a region in Asia Minor, he addresses multiple congregations, “to the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2; cf. 1 Cor. 16:1). In this way, the New Testament teaches us to think of the church universal as myriad of local churches.<sup>26</sup> As Jesus addresses each church individually in Revelation 2–3, we should also assign honor or shame to a local church based upon the actions of that local assembly of believers. It would be foolhardy to praise a local church during the First Great Awakening if they continued to embrace a Unitarian doctrine. Similarly, it would be shameful to condemn any local church as unfaithful on the basis of a regional survey of unethical evangelicals.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the more we attempt to speak of a regional, national, or universal church, the more abstract, imprecise, and unjust our judgments will become. There may be some point of application here, but far better to stick with actual specifics.

The same is true over time. If space makes it impossible for individual churches to address universal concerns, then time is another factor that makes it difficult for a local church to know, understand, or confess with proper care and conviction the sins of a bygone era—for anything beyond their own church. While God knows all things and is able to rightly adjudicate the sins of all people, at all times, in all places, no timebound Christian or assembly of Christians (i.e., the local church) can have such knowledge. Thus all local churches are limited in their ability to offer corporate confession for anything more than the precise knowledge they have of their church.

When we restrict our discussion to the local church, however, we can know with striking precision its origin, history, doctrine, ethics, and even its individual members and their respective testimonies. Admittedly, some churches do better at recording their history than others. And the longer a church exists, and the more transient its members, the more challenging it becomes to know and pass on the history of the church. That said, there is a capability in the local church to know how its covenant community responded to things like slavery, Jim Crow laws, and segregation—or not!

So currently, a local church can take an honest assessment of their practices with respect to worshiping God and loving people. This cannot be said (with as much precision) about a regional, national, or universal church, because the amount of information in those larger entities is too great to know comprehensively. But in the local church, such knowledge may be possible and actionable. Yet, even if it is actionable, the Old Testament system of restitution provides wisdom. The guilty offender must repay the offended party. Or, as it was the case with Zacchaeus, “Restitution makes perfect sense and is eminently biblical, when the person who cheated pays back the person who they cheated.”<sup>28</sup> By contrast, when restitution is demanded of a group for something to which the facts do not hold, injustice is multiplied.

For instance, a church that began in 1995 and sought to receive all church members is playing word games when they repent of their Whiteness and confess their complicity in racism.

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<sup>25</sup> And here I am speaking of local assemblies, not denominations.

<sup>26</sup> Systematically, the universal church includes all of God’s elect in all places and at all times. In this instance, I am focusing on the church militant that stands on the earth at any given time. In a moment, we will consider the universal church in its historical and/or chronological arrangement.

<sup>27</sup> This is one of the errors prevalent in Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*.

<sup>28</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity*, 78.

Indeed, to offer a generic confession of white guilt is only therapeutic and not an actual acknowledgment of wrongdoing or an establishment of justice.

Indeed, because Scripture defines repentance as something we do when the Spirit convicts us of wrongdoing, it is religious theater to confess sins we did not commit. When we are the moral agents of sin, or when we are in covenant community with a church that has broken God's commands, we should confess it as such. Yet, when we have done no wrong, we cannot legitimately confess sin. Equally, a local church should not feel guilty for something they have never done. Indeed, we must not tell lies, nor believe lies.

*Third, and finally, corporate confession and reparation should be pursued in proportion to personal knowledge and involvement.* Again, we need to let the whole counsel of God inform our thinking when it comes to corporate confessions and reparations. In the Old Testament, the covenant people of God were instructed to offer a reparation offering when they sinned against someone else. This offering is described in Leviticus 5:14–6:7 and in it, there was both the need to offer a sacrifice for sin and to make restitution for that sin. As Leviticus 5:16 reads, “He [the worshiper] shall also make restitution for what he has done amiss in the holy thing and shall add a fifth to it and give it to the priest. And the priest shall make atonement for him with the ram of the guilt offering, and he shall be forgiven.” In this atoning sacrifice, the wrong doing is covered by the blood of a sacrificial animal. It was also imperative, however, for the Israelite to make amends with the person he wronged (Lev. 6:1–5). In short, the reparation offering was oriented towards God *and* the one who was exploited or oppressed.

Today, we should understand Christ as the lamb of God who fulfilled the entire sacrificial system, including the reparation offering. This means that the cross is the place where all acts of oppression and exploitation committed by God's people received their payment. Hell is the place where all acts of oppression and exploitation committed by unbelievers will be judged eternally. In these two judgments, all wickedness will receive its just punishment.<sup>29</sup>

With respect to the new covenant people of God, the finished work of Christ is the only place where pardon can be found, no matter what the sin is. Still, because Christ's cross pays the sin-debt and also empowers the child of God to seek the good of those she has harmed, there is a place for Christians to confess their sins to one another (see James 5:16) and to repair the damage that they have done to others. Based upon the last two principles of moral agency and the covenantal union of a local church, it is appropriate for churches to corporately confess sin and seek reparations if and when that local church has demonstrably oppressed or exploited an individual, family, or other group of people.

As the last principle sought to indicate, there is a covenantal participation in sins committed by a church. Yet, deriving a second principle from the reparation offering there is a righteous requirement for the offender to make restitution to the offended. In the Law of Moses, acts of penance were not arbitrary or aesthetic; they were concrete and specific. As in the case of Zacchaeus, when the Lord had mercy on him, he made amends with those in his own town, whom he knew (Luke 19:1–10). Scripture is not interested in arbitrary acts of reparation; it is interested in pursuing justice in concrete, constructive, and personal ways. The cross is not a demonstration of justice (as in the moral government theory of the atonement), the cross is an

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<sup>29</sup> On how Christ's death brings cosmic reconciliation by way of penal substitution for the elect and Christus Victor over against his enemies, see my “The Cross in Colossians: Cosmic Reconciliation through Penal Substitution and Christus Victor.” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 17.3 (Fall 2013): 34–49.

accomplishment of justice and justification. Just the same, in the Old Testament, retributive justice was carried out by means of reconciling the offender to the offended. Today, with the covenant community being the church of Christ, we still see acts of reconciliation taking place in the community that was justified and forgiven by the blood of Christ.

For this reason, it is at the level of a local church, where members of Christ's body with their elders, can discern with the wisdom of Scripture and the knowledge of their specific situation what would be a just response to any personal sin or interpersonal exploitation. While corporate confessions of guilt are being called for in larger settings, it is the local church where such confession and reparation could be profitable. But also the place where manipulation should be most resisted.

On the basis of Matthew 18:15–20 and the appointment of judicious elders in local churches (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1), it appears that God has wisely assigned the scope of “decision making units” to be local church. For at that level, the knowledge which is necessary to make just decisions is sufficient to properly pursue personal and corporate confessions and to require reparations at a proportional level from the offender to the offended. However, once the size of the church, the length of the time, or the scope of the personal relations involved increases, then just compensation is like shooting targets in the dark. There may be some shots that hit their mark, but many will miss and increase the total carnage. For those who just want to do something, shooting in the dark will suffice. But for those, led by Scripture, who desire true justice, not just activist retribution, this will not do. And more Scripture even gives a model.

In Acts, we discover the way in which the Jewish leaders are charged with guilt in killing Jesus in Jerusalem. Yet, as the storyline of the church extends from Jerusalem, to Samaria, to Rome, the guilt does not continue. This is a critical acknowledgement today, as Anti-Semitism is on the rise. Yet, there is nothing in the Bible to defend such hostility to Jews. And the reason is because guilt for Jesus's crucifixion does not go past the Jews in Jerusalem.

Listen to the way Kevin DeYoung frames it. In Jerusalem the Jews “bore responsibility for his murder.”

Once the action leaves Jerusalem, however, the charges start to sound different. In speaking to Cornelius (a Gentile), his relatives, and his close friends, Peter relays that they (the Jews in Jerusalem) put Jesus to death (10:39). Even more specifically, Paul tells the crowd in Pisidian Antioch that “those who live in Jerusalem and their rulers” condemned Jesus (Acts 13:27). This speech is especially important because Paul is talking to Jews. He does not blame the Jews in Pisidian Antioch for the crimes of the Jews in Jerusalem.

This is a consistent pattern. Paul doesn't charge the Jews in Thessalonica or Berea with killing Jesus (Acts 17), nor the Jews in Corinth (Acts 18) or in Ephesus (Acts 19). In fact, when Paul returns to Jerusalem years after the crucifixion, he does not accuse the Jews there of killing Jesus; he does not even charge the council with that crime (Acts 23). He doesn't blame Felix (Acts 24) or Festus (Acts 25) or Agrippa (Acts 26) for Jesus's death, even though they are all men in authority connected in some way with the governing apparatus that killed Christ. The apostles considered the Jews in Jerusalem at the time of the crucifixion uniquely responsible for Jesus's death, but this culpability did not extend to every high-ranking official, to every Jew, or to everyone who would live in

Jerusalem thereafter. The rest of the Jews and Gentiles in the book of Acts still had to repent of their wickedness, but they were not charged with killing the Messiah.<sup>30</sup>

This point should be simple. But in our hyper-sensitive age, where guilt is assigned by the sentiments of the mob, we must relearn how to do justice and to read the Bible justly. And part of what it means to read the Bible justly is to watch how the covenants inform our ethical responsibilities—especially, our responsibilities in the local church.

### **A Post Script on Pursuing Justice and Reading Scripture**

In the end, we can give thanks to God that in heaven his justice is perfect. And one day soon, he will judge every word, action, and intent of the heart. And when he does, Jesus Christ will bring to rights all the wrongs that have occurred from the time of Cain and Abel until now. In the meantime, the church's calling is to proclaim the gospel and to live a life worthy of that calling.

Sometimes that will include corporate confession, including the confession of sins from the past that our local churches have committed. But at other times faithfulness to the Lord will require resisting the pressure to offer confessions that are based upon emotions and not the plain teaching of Scripture.

In this essay, I have argued for a biblical approach to corporate confessions. I have demonstrated the difference between confession under the old covenant and confession under the new. And instead of leaving it there, I have attempted to show how a biblical theology of corporate confessions might be applied in local churches today. Again, I have only given principles, because specifics will require the details of a local church, its history, and its faithfulness or lack thereof.

These are challenging subjects, but they drive us back to the Word of God to find the wisdom we need to be Christ's ambassadors on the earth. With that in mind, may we continue to be ministers of reconciliation, and may our churches be genuine outposts of the kingdom, where peace, mercy, and righteousness are found as the Spirit of Christ teaches us how to read and apply the Scriptures. *Soli Deo Gloria!*

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<sup>30</sup> Kevin DeYoung, *Impossible Christianity*, 82–83.