

Why sin is God's business

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [November 8, 2000](#) issue

A Presbyterian minister told me a story about his first year at a certain congregation. His predecessor had abolished the general confession of sins from the Sunday liturgy, and one of the first things this new pastor did was try to reinstate it. But resistance to the proposed change was fierce. Some members thought that confession of sins was too morbid a thing to do in church, where one's spirits were supposed to be lifted up.

During the heat of the debate one woman—an elder—exclaimed, “But I don't have to apologize to God for anything!” The pastor was dumbfounded. “My seminary training hadn't prepared me for this,” he told me. Whether we are pastors or teachers of future pastors, we usually find the need for confession so obvious that we don't even bother to inquire as to why we might have to “apologize to God.”

I can only guess what that elder meant by her startling denial. She might have meant that God should be bothered only with grave sins such as murder or adultery. Since she had not committed any of these, she did not need to apologize to God. Smaller sins are like traffic violations: one pays for them where payment is due, and that's the end of it.

The response to such a line of thinking would be simple: Anger is God's concern as much as murder, lust as much as adultery. Though it may be helpful to differentiate between big and small sins in relation to their impact upon the sinner herself and her neighbors, all sins, no matter how small, are God's concern.

Or she might have meant that her initial faith and baptism had granted her absolution for all the sins she had ever committed and could ever possibly commit. As far as God is concerned, she might have been thinking, everything has already been taken care of. In this case the response would be a bit more complicated: as far as we are concerned, our sins cannot be “taken care” of in advance, for the simple reason that forgiveness requires our self-awareness as those who have sinned, and self-awareness in turn requires the naming of acts that we have committed as sins.

There is yet another way we might interpret the elder's comment. "An apology is due to a person against whom one has transgressed," she might have been thinking. "When I transgress against my neighbor, I go to her, apologize and make the necessary amends. And since for the most part I never really encounter God, let alone transgress against God, why would I need to apologize to God? God is in heaven and I am on earth. Whoever storms heaven to injure God's divine highness, let *him* apologize. My sins are of a more modest kind, all directed against creatures here below, and all to be ironed out between ourselves."

A theologian could jump in: "But you don't seem to understand what sin means. Sin is fundamentally a theological category; by definition, every sin is a sin against God, no matter who else is involved. Take God out of it, and our small and large deceptions and injustices are just that: deceptions, injustices and violences; but they are not *sins*."

"That's just what I would expect a theologian to say," she might counter. "Let's not quibble about definitions; let's look at the matter itself. Surely the question is not how one defines sin, but why acts which have nothing to do with God should be understood as sins. If I cheat on my husband, I've cheated on my husband; I haven't done God any wrong. Why should I apologize to God for what I have done to my husband?" And to prevent the theologian from making a quick rejoinder, she could add, "Don't tell me that I should not cheat because God commands me not to do so. For then God would be like a parent whose pride gets the better of her. She demands obedience to her commands just because they are her commands."

This is where things get complicated—and interesting. "At one level," the theologian might respond, "sin *is* a transgression against God's command. But a transgression against God's command is not just a sin because it is an act of disobedience. The trouble has started already when one thinks of God as being 'out there' and of us as being 'down here.' God is not just 'in heaven'; God is also 'on earth.' The earth and all that is in it are God's. Their well-being is God's joy; their pain is God's suffering. When you transgress against your neighbor, it involves God, because you are transgressing against one of God's creatures and therefore against God. In relation to our transgressions, God is not simply a just and all-knowing referee who remains outside of these purely human disputes. God is always also an injured party. For every transgression against the neighbor, apology is owed both to the neighbor and to God.

“Which is why”—and here our imaginary dialogue returns to the original issue—“the confession of sins is appropriately included in services of Christian worship. It is in worship that together we meet the God who is not simply enthroned in heaven ‘out there,’ but who ‘dwells with us,’ supremely in the person and story of Jesus, and who thereby receives our acknowledgment of wrongdoing and pronounces us forgiven; and it is in this community that we can learn the hard work of reconciliation and renewal in the power of God’s Spirit given to us.”

Not, perhaps, very different from what one would expect a theologian to say. But then occasionally a theologian may be right even when she says what we expect her to say.