

This book has spoken a lot about identificational repentance as a biblical practice that helps break spiritual penalties for past sins. However, it seems that most Christians and many pastors are not familiar with it.

So, I have asked a biblical scholar and friend, **Dr. Gary S. Greig**, Ph.D. to write this chapter from a biblical scholar's perspective. Dr. Greig is a former Associate Professor of Old Testament at Regent University in Virginia Beach as well as the former Vice-President for Bible and Content at Gospel Light Publications.

Much of the material cited here has been taken from Dr. Greig's personal teaching notes at Regent University.¹ While this section is for the more theologically trained, if you read and look up the references in the first few pages (up through his answers to Objection #3), you'll have the essence of it.

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What Is Identificational Repentance

I would say that identificational repentance is a person or group identifying with the sins of others, past or present, and repenting to God for those sins so that the God-given penalties (which the devil will exploit) are broken off of those repenting and off of those connected to the people repenting. Since blessings and curses extend through the generations to those around the person blessed or cursed, the blessing and release we receive for repenting accrues to those connected to us now and in the future! Bless your kids and grandkids and city and nation: do identificational repentance!

Identificational Repentance is a term which was recently coined by John Dawson,² International Director of Urban Missions for Youth With A Mission (YWAM). Identificational Repentance is a type of prayer which identifies with and confesses before God the sins of one's nation, people, church, or family. Cindy Jacobs, President and co-founder with her husband, Mike Jacobs, of Generals International, has also taught for over a decade on healing the nations and reaching them for Christ through corporate prayer and repentance for corporate sins.³

Sins often stand in the way of revival, and God seems to move with greater blessing and power to advance the gospel and the cause of Christ where the Body of Christ prays this way. The purpose of such prayer is to open doors for the gospel and allow God to heal the land, according to the promises of II Chronicles 7:14, "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Modern Examples

Identificational repentance is not a new kind of prayer never before seen in the Church, as some suggest. For example, corporate confession of sin is a well-established category, distinct from individual confession of sin, going back almost 500 years in the worship tradition of the Anglican Church. In the Book of Common Prayer 1559 (the Elizabethan Prayer Book), for example, we find the following prayer:

Remember not Lord our iniquities, nor the iniquities of our forefathers. Spare us good Lord, spare thy people, whom thou hast redeemed with thy most precious blood, and be not angry with us forever. Lord have mercy upon us. Christ have mercy upon us. Lord have mercy upon us.⁴

The 1789 ratified Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A. includes the Psalter to be used for congregational prayers. The introduction to the collection of Psalms for daily prayers explains that "the Psalter is a body of liturgical poetry. It is designed for vocal, congregational use, whether by singing or reading."⁵ The Psalms designated for morning and evening prayers, for example, specify on the twenty-first day of evening prayer the reading of Psalm 106. This chapter of the Bible includes a corporate prayer confessing generational sin: "We have sinned as our forebears did; we have done wrong and dealt wickedly. (Psalm 106:6)"⁶ In addition the Book of Occasional Services of the Episcopal Church, U.S.A., contains a prayer of corporate confession of generational sin:

Teach your Church, O Lord, to mourn the sins of which it is guilty, and to repent and forsake them; that, by your pardoning grace, the results of our iniquities may not be visited upon our children and our children's children; through Jesus Christ our Lord; Amen.⁷

Colin Dunlop, former Dean of Lincoln Cathedral, articulates the nature of corporate identity and confession in Anglican worship with these words:

We make our confession as members of the Church, "members one of another." We confess not only our own private sins, but . . . our share in that whole aggregate of sin which all but crushed our Master in the Garden of Gethsemane.⁸

Another example of mainline denominational corporate confession comes from the German Lutheran Church. At the end of World War II, in October 1945, the newly formed United Evangelical Lutheran Church, under the influence of one of its leaders, the prominent anti-Nazi theologian and pastor, Rev. Dr. Martin Niemöller, who resisted the Nazis alongside the famous Christian martyr Rev. Dr. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, issued the "Stuttgart Confession of Guilt" (Stuttgarter Schulderklärung). In the Stuttgart Confession, the German Lutheran church identified with and confessed the corporate guilt of the German people for the widespread suffering perpetrated by the former Nazi government with words like:

With great pain we say: Through us unending suffering has been brought upon many nations and countries...Now a new beginning should be made in our churches.⁹

Apparently, the Lutheran denominational leadership felt identificational repentance kept with their theological understanding of Christian confession. This corporate confession of national guilt has been articulated and discussed over the past decades by German theologians like Dr. Martin Honecker and Dr. Gerhard Besier,¹⁰ as well as by German New Testament scholars including Dr. Bertold Klappert of the University of Göttingen.¹¹

Recent Evangelical Teaching

Identificational repentance is really not a new practice in the Christian Church. Over the past decade many Evangelical Christian leaders have revived the practice of prayer with corporate confession of corporate and generational sin at the family level, as well as at the level of cities, people groups, and nation—Cindy Jacobs (*Possessing the Gates of the Enemy*, 192ff., 236ff.; *The Voice of God*, 237ff.), John Dawson (*Taking Our Cities for God*, 19ff.; *Healing America's Wounds*, 15ff), Bob Beckett (in C. P. Wagner's, *Breaking Strongholds in Your City*, 160-162), Dr. C. Peter Wagner (*Confronting the Powers*, 260), Dr. Ed Murphy (*Handbook for Spiritual Warfare*, 437-438), Dr. Neil T. Anderson (*Bondage Breaker*, 201), Dr. Charles H. Kraft

(Defeating Dark Angels, 74-75), Francis Frangipane (The Divine Antidote, 68-69), and Tom White (Believer's Guide to Spiritual Warfare, 150).

All these leaders, to one degree or another, have taught or advocated the Old Testament model of corporate confession. On a personal level this means confessing and repenting in whatever way possible of the sins of one's parents and ancestors. On a national level this means the Church identifying with the nation as a "royal priesthood" (I Pet. 2:9), confessing the sins of the nation, repenting of those sins in whatever way possible, and asking God to heal our nation (II Chronicles 7:14) and turn it to Christ.

Objections and Answers from the Bible¹²

Is identificational repentance really biblical? Does the New Testament teach us to follow the Old Testament model of confessing corporate sin, generational sin, and national sin in addition to personal sin?

The question is really the following: Is the confession of corporate sin—which includes generational sin and national sin—still a legitimate category of confession in New Testament faith, as it was in the Old Testament?

First, it should be clear from the start that we are saved not by keeping Old Testament covenantal law but by faith in Christ and the atonement of His blood for our sins (Rom. 6:14; Gal. 2:16; 5:6; Eph. 2:8). However, this does not mean that the deeper principles of God's character mentioned in Exodus. 34:5-7 or the deeper principles of the Ten Commandments mentioned in Exodus. 20:3-17 and Deut. 5:7-2 are nullified by faith in Christ. Paul emphatically teaches this: "Do we, then, nullify the law by this faith? Not at all! Rather, we uphold the law." (Rom. 3:31) New Testament faith fulfills or establishes the deeper principles of Old Testament law according to Romans 8:4; 13:8.

Second, *the Old Testament was the only Canon of authoritative Scripture the New Testament Church had before the New Testament documents began to be collected in the late first century A.D.* When Paul wrote in II Timothy 3:16 "All Scripture is God-breathed and is

useful for teaching . . . and training in righteousness" he meant "All the Old Testament is God-breathed and is useful for teaching . . . and training in righteousness." Since the Old Testament was the Bible of the early church pictured in Acts, this means that the Old Testament's view of sin and the Old Testament's model of confession was the only scriptural view of sin and model of confession the New Testament church had. New Testament passages which explicitly teach about confessing sin, including James 5:16 and I John 1:9, are written against the background of the Old Testament's concept of sin and confession.

We also need to understand that the New Testament offers no new framework of sin and confession apart from that found in the Old Testament. The only fundamental modification in the New Testament is that Christ is now the eternal sacrifice for all sin in place of all Old Testament sacrifices for sin (Matt. 26:28; Mark. 14:24; Luke. 22:20; John. 1:9; Heb. 9-10; I John. 2:2). Many Old Testament and New Testament scholars have pointed out that the New Testament concept of sin and the New Testament framework of public confession of personal and corporate sin pictured in such passages as I John. 1:9 and James. 5:16 is entirely shaped by the Old Testament concept of sin and confession.

This should not be surprising since the Old Testament was the Bible of the New Testament Church and offered the only scriptural model of sin and confession available to the Early Church. Not surprisingly, references from intertestamental Jewish religious literature¹³ indicate that the Jewish community of Jesus' day, out of which the Early Church was born, continued to follow the Old Testament model of confessing personal as well as generational and national sins, as the fifth century B.C. Jewish community of Jerusalem had done before them in Neh. 9:2.

Exodus 34:5-7 and Exodus 20:5-6 and their parallel Old Testament passages ¹⁴show that the heart of the Lord's character is that He shows compassion and love toward thousands of generations of those who love Him, but His holiness causes Him *to visit the iniquity of parents upon their descendants* to the third and fourth generation of those who hate him.

Some translations are inaccurately periphrastic in rendering Exo. 20:5 and 34:7 "punishing the children for the sin of the fathers," since the Hebrew simply says "visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children"—parental sin patterns and sin guilt (Hebrew “awon” primarily denotes "iniquity, [state of] guilt," and the meaning "punishment" is a less certain secondary sense of the

word) will be visited upon, repaid to (Heb., Isa. 65:6; Jer. 32:18), or measured out (Heb. Isa. 65:7) upon the children.

The children will not be punished for their parents' sins but challenged and influenced by the sin-weaknesses and sin-tendencies of their parents *along with any accompanying spiritual bondage*. (Spiritual bondage is explicitly referred to in Hos. 4:12-13; see below.) The implicit challenge to the children in these passages (made explicit in Ezek. 18:20 and Jer. 31:29-30 which will be discussed later) is to repent and make a break with parental and generational sin rather than continue in it.

The Old Testament model of receiving forgiveness of sins is by confessing and repenting of our sins according to Prov. 28:13 ("whoever confesses and forsakes [sins] finds mercy"). In the Old Testament's view, one should confess not only personal sin but also parental and national sin according to Lev. 26:38-40. Nehemiah's prayer in Neh. 1:6-9 shows that he understood that both confession and repentance are taught in the Covenantal Law codes of the Pentateuch and that both are necessarily inseparable aspects of turning away from sin and returning to the Lord.

We see the kind of confession of personal and corporate, generational sin which is prescribed in Lev. 26:40 practiced throughout Israel's history by Jeremiah (Jer. 3:25; 14:7, 20), the author who composed Ps. 106:6, and the congregation for whom it was written, by Daniel (Dan. 9:8, 20), by Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:6-7), and by the restoration Jewish community of fifth century Jerusalem in Neh. 9:2. This form of prayer is part of the covenantal background of the oft-quoted promises of II Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, who are called by my name, will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land."

Furthermore, Jesus, Peter, and Paul all assumed and made passing mention of the Old Testament concept of generational sin as an ongoing reality in Mat. 23:32-35 ("Fill up then the measure [of the sin] of your forefathers," alluding to Gen. 15:16 and Lev. 18:25; "upon you will come all the righteous blood," alluding to the theme of blood-guilt in such passages as Isa. 59:3; Ezek. 9:9; and Lev. 20:9), in I Thess. 2:16 ("so as always to fill up [the measure of] their sin," alluding to Gen. 15:16 and Lev. 18:25), and I Pet. 1:18-19 ("the empty way of life handed down

to us from our forefathers" which many scholars believe is a reference to pagan idolatry as in Exo. 20:5; Deut. 5:9).

Jesus states in John 9:3 that the blindness of the man who was born blind was not caused by the man's sin or by his parent's sin. Many claim that this pronouncement of Jesus signals an end to the Old Testament principle of generational sin being visited upon later generations. But this is simply not true. *Jesus simply asserts that in this case generational sin and personal sin are not the cause of the man's blindness.* Jesus could hardly be denying the general principle of generational sin in John 9:2-3 since he clearly assumes it in Matt. 23:32-35 and two of his most devoted followers, Paul and Peter are likewise seen to be assuming it in I Thessalonians 2:16 and I Pet. 1:18.

I Peter 1:18-19 states that the precious blood of Christ saves us from the empty pattern of ancestral sin handed down to us by our forefathers. It is important to remember in connection with I Pet. 1:18-19 that the blood of Christ redeeming us at conversion does not dispense with our need to continue to confess sin and be cleansed by Christ's blood after putting our faith in Christ. I John 1:7-9 was written to believers:

If we walk in the light...the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves...If we confess our sins, he...will forgive us our sins." Interestingly, the word "purifies" is the Greek *katharízei*—a present indicative denoting an imperfective aspect or ongoing action that "keeps on purifying.

The fact that the Old Testament concept of generational sin is assumed in the New Testament suggests that the Old Testament corollary concept of confessing corporate, generational, and national sin is still a legitimate category of confession in New Testament faith.

And this conclusion is borne out by examples of corporate confession in later Christian confessional traditions, such as the Anglican corporate confessional prayer tradition and the post-World War II example in the German Lutheran Stuttgart Confession of Guilt.

But why...should we take responsibility for past sins in our family lines or the sins of our nation which we have not committed?

First, I Peter 2:9 says that we are a "royal priesthood," and there is a priestly aspect to biblical examples of identificational repentance prayer. Even in cases where we have not personally committed the corporate sins we are confessing before God, John Dawson points out that "we can all identify with the roots of any given sin."¹⁵ We may not have had an abortion, but we can identify with the lust, the love of comfort, the love of money, the rejection, and the unbelief which are the sinful root attitudes leading to abortion.

Jeremiah did not commit the sins he confessed in Jer. 3:25; 14:7, 20. Rather, he prophesied against the sins of Judah and Jerusalem and was persecuted for it (Jer. 2:1—5:31; 11:18-23; 12:6; 18:18-20; 20:2; 37:15-16; 38:6). Still, Jeremiah confessed Judah and Jerusalem's sins nonetheless according to the instruction of Lev. 26:40 (Jer. 14:20 "we acknowledge our wickedness and the iniquity of our fathers; we have . . . sinned against you"). When Ezra (Ezra 9:6-15), Nehemiah (Neh. 1:6f.), and Daniel (Dan. 9:8, 20) confessed the sin of their people, no evidence in any of the texts suggests they had personally committed all those sins. But in obedience to Lev. 26:40, they confessed their people's sin anyway, as Jeremiah before them had done.

There is a second benefit to prayer involving identificational repentance for our families, churches, and nation. Daniel's example of identificational repentance in Daniel 9 and 10 shows that identificational repentance breaks through the spiritual opposition of satanic principalities and powers. Repentance from sin smashes the work of the devil because the devil and his forces work through sin in the world and in our lives (I John. 3:7-9; Eph. 4:26-27 and context).

We have sinned, committed iniquity, acted wickedly and rebelled, even turning aside from Your commandments and ordinances. Moreover, we have not listened to Your servants the prophets, who spoke in Your name to our kings, our princes, our fathers and all the people of the land. (Daniel 9:5-6)

Daniel's identificational repentance led to a spiritual breakthrough in Dan. 9:20-22 when the angel Gabriel appeared to him. Dan. 9:3 mentions that Daniel was praying and fasting when he confessed his people's sins on that occasion. Dan 10:2-3, 12 shows that Daniel was praying and fasting on a second occasion. Prayer and fasting were often associated with confessing sin in the Old Testament (I Sam. 7:2-6; II Sam. 12:13, 16; Neh. 1:4-7; 9:1-2; Ps. 51:1ff.). This fact and the thematic similarity of Dan 9 and 10 suggest that in Dan. 10 Daniel would have been praying a prayer similar to the one he prayed in Dan. 9 including confessing his sins and the sins of his nation.

Doesn't the Bible show that we can only seek and receive forgiveness for our own individual sin and that we cannot remit the sins of others—we cannot receive God's forgiveness or apply God's forgiveness to the sins of others, whether families, corporate bodies, or nations from which we come or to which we belong?

If it were true that the Bible teaches one cannot seek or receive God's forgiveness on a corporate level for the sins of others, one would have a hard time explaining why Moses did just that for Israel after their sin with the golden calf (Exo. 32:9-14; 34:8-9; Deut. 9:18-29; 10:10-11; Ps. 106:23). In Exo. 34:8-9 he identifies himself with sins he did not commit, "Forgive our wickedness and our sin." In Num. 14:13-20, he asked for the Lord's mercy and forgiveness for Israel's rebellious refusal to enter Canaan after the spies' bad report. And Moses received forgiveness for Israel: "The Lord replied, 'I have forgiven them as you asked' (Num. 14:20). The Lord's intention to destroy Israel was abated because of Moses' intercession. Moses did remit the sins of Israel; he sought and received God's forgiveness for them.

This kind of prophetic intercession was so basic to prophetic ministry from Moses onward that Samuel the prophet said it would be a sin for him not to pray for Israel regularly (I Sam. 12:23). This is precisely the kind of intercession the Lord looked for to avert His wrath and to extend forgiveness to His people according to Ezek. 22:29-30: "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand in the breach before me on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it."

In John 20:23, Jesus gives the disciples the authority to forgive the sins of others—to apply God's forgiveness to others. Paul also seems to expect the Corinthians to exercise such forgiveness toward a repentant member of the church in II Cor. 2:7-10. Again, this seems to suggest a priestly function which reflects the fact that we are "royal priesthood" (I Pet. 2:9) who can receive and apply and proclaim God's forgiveness to others we pray for and pray with.

Similarly, Ezra's identificational repentance in Ezra 9:6-15 on behalf of the fifth century B.C. Jewish community of Jerusalem in Ezra 10:1-4, resulted in the people, for whom he was praying, being moved more freely to repent of their sins. Nehemiah's confessing his people's sins before God and asking God to forgive them on a corporate level in Neh. 1:6 along with Ezra's identificational repentance in Ezra 9:6-15 also seems to have released God's grace on a corporate level to move the community to weep openly and repent of their sins in Neh. 8:9-11 and 9:1-2, when Ezra read the Law.

Thus, the cases of Moses, Ezra and Nehemiah show that on *a corporate level*, God's mercy and forgiveness can be sought and received for those one identifies with through prayer. Individuals are still responsible to repent personally of their individual sin (cf. Exo. 32:33-34; Num. 14:21-35, 37), but identificational repentance releases a measure of God's grace and forgiveness on the corporate level that helps move individuals to repentance and faith.

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This concludes the excerpt from Dr. Greig's outstanding paper on identificational repentance.

1 Gary Greig, "Healing the Land: What Does the Bible Say about Identificational Repentance, Prayer and Advancing God's Kingdom?" (Regent University Class Notes: August 22, 1996)

2 John Dawson, *Healing America's Wounds* (Ventura: Regal, 1994), 15.

3 Cindy Jacobs, *Possessing the Gates of the Enemy* (Tarrytown, Revell, 1991), 192ff., 236ff.; id., *The Voice of God* (Ventura, Regal, 1995), 237ff.

4 J. E. Booty, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer 1559: the Elizabethan Prayer Book* (Washington: Folger Shakespeare Library, 1976), 300 (part of "The Order for the Visitation of the Sick").

5 Ibid., 582.

6 C. M. Guilbert, ed., *The Book of Common Prayer (1789 Ratified Version of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the U.S.A.)*, New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), 742.

- 7 The Standing Liturgical Commission of the Episcopal Church in the U.S.A., *The Book of Occasional Services* (New York: Church Hymnal Corp., 1979), 64 (Eighth Station of the Cross in the Service of the Way of the Cross).
- 8 C. Dunlop, *Anglican Public Worship* (London: SCM Press, 1953), p. 95.
- 9 "Mit grossem Schmerz sagen wir: Durch uns ist unendliches Leid über viele Völker und Länder gebracht worden. . . Nun soll in unseren Kirchen ein neuer Anfang gemacht werden." Cited by M. Honecker, "Individuelle Schuld und Kollektive Verantwortung: Können Kollektive Sündigen? (Individual Guilt and Corporate Responsibility: Can Corporate Entities Sin?)," *Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche* 90 (1993): 217; id., "Geschichtliche Schuld und Kirchliches Bekenntnis (Historical Guilt and Ecclesiastical Confession)," *Theologische Zeitschrift* 42 (1986): 132-158; G. Besier and G. Sauter, *Wie Christen Ihre Schuld Bekennen. Die Stuttgarter Erklärung* (How Christians Confess Their Guilt. The Stuttgart Confession), Göttingen: Vandenhoeck Ruprecht, 1985.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 B. Klappert, *Bekennende Kirche in Ökumenischer Verantwortung* (The Confessing Church in Ecumenical Responsibility), (Munich: Chr. Kaiser, 1988).
- 12 This section is quoted only in part from Dr. Greig.
- 13 Baruch 1:15-3:8; Tobit 3:1-17; I Esdras 8:74-90; Qumran Manual of Discipline 1.23-26; etc.
- 14 Lev. 18:25; Num. 14:18, 33; Deut. 5:9; 7:10; Isa. 65:6-7; Jer. 32:18; cf. Job 21:19; Ps. 79:8; 109:14-16
- 15 Dawson, 95.