

Confession: A pastoral psychotherapeutic practice in the *familia Dei*

ABSTRACT

Transgressions bring disorder in the fabric of the familia Dei. They spoil the fellowship¹. Fellowship is the driving and binding force within the familia Dei. Transgressions impact negatively on the well-being of the familia Dei and results in dysfunctionality. To remove the dysfunctionality from the familia Dei requires an act of thorough going transformation or cleansing.

In reality such an act of cleansing is ultimately therapeutic (1 John 1:9). According to 1 John therapy comes with acknowledgement of guilt and confession of wrongdoing. The good goal of therapy through confession is described by Müller as “the realisation of the new world in Christ” (Müller, 2002:40).

This article argues that the pastoral-psychotherapeutic function of confession of guilt mends the brokenness in the familia Dei. It maintains the fellowship within the familia Dei and reinstates the identity of the confessant. Through confession of guilt the confessant experiences relief and in-homeness² with the Triune God and with fellow Christians.

INTRODUCTION

This article deals with the pastoral-psychotherapeutic function of confession in transforming dysfunctional human beings for the better. This function is concentrated within the *familia Dei* as portrayed in the First Epistle of John. This *familia Dei* is that of the Father, the Son and the believers as children. The function of confession strengthens the fellowship and binds this *familia Dei* together.

Contrasting modes of confession have been followed by the church in history; auricular and public confession does differ. The Reformed churches opted for public confession in their liturgies. The pastoral-psychotherapeutic function is demonstrated as keeping the

1 For Moulton the Greek word *koinonia* lexicographically means “fellowship”, “partnership”, “participation”, or “communion” (Moulton 1978:235).

The Concise Oxford Dictionary agrees with Moulton in explaining ‘fellowship’ as a noun meaning “participation”, “sharing”, “community of interest”, “companion”, “intercourse”, “body of associates” or “company” (Concise Oxford Dictionary, 1983:356).

Newman explains *koinonia* as “fellowship”, “close mutual relationship”, “participation”, “sharing in”, “partnership”, “contribution”, “gift” or “partner or sharer” (Newman, 1971:101-102).

These denotations all suggest fellowship in the sense of association. This article accepts this sense of fellowship as an association involving close mutual relations and involvement as fundamental. All other senses of the term are accommodated in this basic sense of the term. For this basic meaning is implied in the sense of what a family is. Fellowship so appears to be what binds the *familia Dei* together.

2 In this article ‘to be in-homeness’ is an illustration of an all-embracing characteristic of the Christian person in the indissoluble unity with the Triune God and neighbourhood. It is a comprehensive term for our gracious elevation and moral perfection, which together provide a model of what it means to be a Christian. Only those who prove themselves by loving –by this very love- share the divine nature and have fellowship and experience in-homeness with God and brothers and sisters.

familia Dei fabric together because confession is perceived as transformative, therapeutic and as embodying a faithful confessional praxis.

1. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

1.1. Humanistic psychotherapeutic approach

1.1.1. *Definition of 'personality'*

Burger, a psychologist, in a general psychological sense defines personality as “consistent behaviour patterns and intrapersonal processes originating within the individual” (Burger, 2004:4). This definition entails two parts, namely consistent patterns of behaviour, and intrapersonal processes. The consistent patterns of behaviour can be identified “across time and across situations” (Burger, 2004:4). While the intrapersonal processes “include all the emotional, motivational, and cognitive processes that go on inside” an individual (Burger, 2004:4). However, the intrapersonal processes greatly affect how an individual acts and feels. This general definition of personality underlying personality theory generally has consequences for psychotherapeutic practice.

1.1.2. *Humanistic psychotherapeutic process*

A variety of psychotherapeutic techniques have been developed by psychiatrists. These techniques can be applied eclectically according to each therapist’s unique approach. The therapeutic techniques of the humanistic personality theorists proceed on assumption that a person is able to obtain insight and are free to choose how to act in future.

Humanistic personality theorists employ at least four concepts in explaining personality and for therapeutic³ purposes, namely, self-disclosure, loneliness, self-esteem and solitude. For the purposes of this article self-disclosure requires closer attention.

1.1.3. *Self-disclosure*

Psychotherapists stress that ‘self-disclosure’ is therapeutic in nature and application. Many humanistic psychologists “argue that self-disclosure is an important step in our personal growth and happiness” (Burger, 2004:339). Open self disclosure by an individual or group within a close relationship of mutual trust is essential to self-understanding. Unless a self-discloser is open and transparent about him/her to others the self-discloser can never grow and become fully self-actualised.

This intrapersonal process, self-disclosure, plays an important role in psychotherapeutic processes. A person experiences relief and self-actualisation when she/he openly exchanges thoughts and feelings with others. The term ‘others’ may include friends, loved ones and therapist. Burger observes that “putting feelings into words allows us to understand those feelings in a way that simply thinking about emotions cannot” (Burger, 2004:339). To give vent to emotions has a significant therapeutic value in a person’s life.

The psychotherapeutic process calls upon an individual and/or a group to disclose

³ According to Louw, “there is a clear difference between therapy in a psychological context and therapy in a theological context. Psychotherapy concerns a person’s personality functions and problems on an intra—psychic, inter-personal and contextual level. Pastoral therapy is primarily concerned with problems on a spiritual level: it focuses on people’s functions of faith and their relationship with God. Insofar as psychic, relational and contextual problems are at issue in pastoral care, they are connected to belief and the quest for meaning in life. Furthermore, growth and development in theology is not related merely to inner potential, but to the charismatic potential in the pneumatic person” (Louw, 2000:443-444).

the intrapersonal emotions and thoughts. In other words a person should confess experiences in close relationships of mutual trust so that she/he can grow and become fully self-actualised. 1 John encourages the adherents to confess their guilt so that they can receive forgiveness from the Son of God⁴, the Lord, and so that they can freely claim to walk in the light with the Father. Humanistic psychologists by their self-disclosure theory lend support to the notion of public confession. They would have people disclose themselves to others, to share important personal information with others in a trusting relationship. One such relationship is that of family. Another, more fundamental one is that described by 1 John as the *familia Dei*. The kind of fellowship and disclosure or confession proper to the *familia Dei*, therefore requires our close attention.

1.2. Family: metaphor⁵ used to denote the nature of a new fellowship

1 John refers to kinship relations to convey the reality of the family of God. The addresses were, of course, familiar with such relations. Nevertheless, the family of God supersedes, existentially and ethically the familiar kinship relations. 1 John uses kinship relations as metaphor to convey the reality of the *familia Dei*.

In the *familia Dei* God Himself is portrayed as the Father. As a parent the Father is the giver of love. "God is love" and His love is fully expressed, disclosed, in His Son. He has disclosed His amazing love by the incarnation of His Son. The Father never despises the children "born of God" (1 John 2: 29; 3:9; 5:1, 4, 18). If the children of God, members of His family, live according to the norms of that family, they have God's life. The Father provides for His children and maintains the household.

Jesus gained the right to found this fellowship of the *familia Dei* by His incarnation. His incarnation discloses:

- A unique relationship between the Father and the Son (1:3),
- the Way to know God,
- God's own life in the Son, and
- Allows a person who accepts the Son of God who is the life to accept God's life (1:4).

The close relationship of mutual trust among the children themselves and with God is

determined by the centrality of Jesus in the fellowship. His presence in the fellowship alone

4 "The love of God has been 'revealed', that is, become open to experience through God's sending of His only Son into the world. This ... God's self-revelation is deliberately...the personal revelation of the Son of God (cf. 1:2; 3:5, 8), in which the love of God –as also the life of God- manifests itself. The hidden nature of God has only now become recognizable in its fullness. This is not just the revelation of a single divine attribute, but of God as the One who loves. He always has been so, but this has become open to experience among us only in the coming of His Son" (Schnackenburg, 1992:208). This means that through the Son God's love becomes the hallmark of God's people as His children because God enabled them to become His children in a true existential sense. It is on this basis of the power of God that they can love and do so only because God first loved them. This love God has bestowed upon them is a vital movement, a form of existence, an actualization of God in the world.

5 Etymologically, the word 'metaphor' comes from the Greek and means 'transfer'. Meta implies 'a change' and pherein means 'to bear, or carry'. According to Joubert, in modern Greek the word metaphor means to 'transport' or 'transfer' (Joubert, 2007:2).

Lexicographically, metaphor is a noun meaning an "application of a name or descriptive term or phrase to an object or action to which it is imaginatively but not literally applicable" (Concise Oxford dictionary, 1983: 636). From a language usage perspective, "metaphor is generally considered to be a direct equation of terms that are more forceful and assertive than an analogy...because a metaphor calls into question the underlying category structure..." (Joubert, 2007:2).

makes the *familia Dei*. It is the Son's living fellowship with the Father and with His brethren, the children; therefore, of God that enables the whole fellowship of the family of God.

The term 'brother' serves to demonstrate the brotherly love relationship amongst the children of God in the *familia Dei*. As children of the same family they must love, trust and respect each other. The children of God must "perfect their love by removing the defensiveness that comes from fear and open their hearts to each other in care...pray for each other and correct each other" (Johnson, 1987:509). This qualitatively denotes the new identity of the children of God and their status as part of the *familia Dei*. If the children of God love⁶ one another that will show them to be born of God and to know the Father who will abide with His children. Parentage is not in doubt. They are born again. According to Van der Merwe

"when a person accepts this new way of life, new rules and new values replace previous traditions, rules and values. This birth is essential, for the child of God has to take on the same life as the Father, which must be evident in the conduct of the family" (Van der Merwe, 2006).

The children of God should shun evil and conduct themselves so as to please their Father, disclosing, in their fellowship, as family of God, who are, newly born of God, aware of and ready to confess and acknowledge the wrong they did and do as unbecoming in this family. The confessor then must hear the confessant's confession in the context of the new life being experienced. That is to be central to the pastoral function of confession as the following paragraph seeks to illustrate.

1.3. A pastoral view of fellowship

Although confession creates a new self-realisation in newness of life no one can be forced to confess any guilt. Pastoral context can only help the confessant to formulate his/her own decision. Hence a pastoral conversation between the confessant and the confessor should precede a public confession. Such pastoral conversation must be conducted from a faith⁷ perspective. The *familia Dei* forms a unique context in which the pastoral act of confession can be mediated and realised. It is a relationship of mutual trust. From the viewpoint of pastoral care and counselling the *familia Dei*, through fellowship, forms a context for the pastoral encounter of the confessant and the confessor. This pastoral encounter takes place in the presence of the Triune God.

The presence of the Triune God in such a pastoral encounter is comforting for both the confessant and confessor. This comfort which should characterise pastoral confession the

⁶ According to Thompson, "Christian love for each other grows from God's prior love. Our ability to love depends on the power of God's love in us, enabling us to love others ... love is commitment ... [C]hristians are not to allow the world to shape their lives, but to love God and allow that love to direct all that they are and do" (Thompson, 1992:23). Emphasis is mine.

⁷ "faith ... the basis for a right understanding of God's revelation and requirement of love (4:15f). 1 John lays no stress on the promise to the victors, but rather on the way they may arrive at this victory, namely, through the true faith. [S]o everything depends on the purity of the faith and on the clarity of their Christological confession" (Schnackenburg, 1992:231).

Bible assigns to the faithful that are born of God⁸ as a matter of great responsibility. Pastoral comfort is essential for the realisation of mutual brotherly love⁹ among the children of God (1 John 3:1). This mutual brotherly love always mends the broken fellowship amongst those who possess the Father's seed. Such a pastoral encounter full of comfort grows into a fellowship which can function in the midst of public relationships. This comfort is so significant because it is formed in a pastoral encounter; it is not shameful to accompany the confessant to make a public confession. The comfort of brotherhood then, also extends to include the public confession of the confessant.

The confessant will publicly confess within a support system of pastoral fellowship. Such pastoral fellowship will serve to develop and strengthen the faith of the confessant. From the pastoral care viewpoint this can be achieved by conveying the fulfilled promises of the Word. The Word should be interpreted within the actual relationships, contexts and life issues of the confessant. This requires an integral, organic, life-related interpretation of the Word. The Scriptural truth embodied in the metaphoric use of family in 1 John is that the transgressions which the confessant should confess cannot be dealt with effectively unless the confessant is saved by a radical inner transformation that enables the confessant to acknowledge her/his wrongs and directed to right conduct.

So the pastoral encounter creates good space within the *familia Dei* for pastoral therapy to take place. The main purpose of such pastoral encounter is to create comfort¹⁰ in the inner most being of both the confessant and the confessor. Such comfort grants the confessant a surety for the protection of his/her well-being, his/her spiritual growth and maturity of faith. Having discussed the humanistic concept of self-disclosure, family as metaphor in *familia Dei*, and the pastoral view of fellowship, we now turn to discussions of 'confession'.

1.4. Definition of confession

The Christian church is always called to maintain truth, love, a sense of wrongdoing and harmony within society and herself from her beginnings. She exists in society to this end. This is because society and people in it tend to deviate from God's norms for life in deed and word. Such deviation impels the Christian church to call people in society to remember and to share stories and experiences in which wrongdoings are not ignored, but confessed.

8 Schnackenburg (1992:162-163) comments on the meaning of this expression as follows; in 1 John being born of God and being child of God are equivalent. This is because it is not the process but the effect and the condition of being born of God that are being envisioned. The epistle focuses on what it means to be a child of God and on its moral implications...[F]aith in Christ (5:1) and love (4:7) or doing what is right (2:29) are not preconditions, still less means, but rather criteria for being born of God. In the process of being born of God...a person becomes a new creature, one "born of the Spirit" (John 3:6) or "born of God" (1 John). That person embodies the way of God as contrasted with the way of the devil (1 John 3:10) and the way of the "world" (1 John 4:4f.; 5:4, 19).

9 This mutual brotherly love is rooted in the fact that the adherents are the children of God who have the "seed of God" (3:9). "The child of God is not his seed; rather, the seed of God abides in the child....[B]ut being a child of God is not a natural status...it is a supernatural, ontological reality...manifested in their character and behavior" (Schnackenburg, 1992:162). These are the moral implications of being the child of God whether one is a confessant or confessor.

10 Such pastoral comfort can be "achieved only when we are completely permeated with the divine nature. Essential to this is our moral attitude above all, love...[T]hen again, love is declared to be the criterion of our being born of God (4:7). To be child of God says something not only about what we are but also how we behave" (Schnackenburg, 1992:164).

The remembering and sharing intended here is confessional¹¹ in nature. The function of confession is transformative. It is transformative in the sense that it transforms the hearts of the people. The focus here will be on those who belong to the *familia Dei*.

This article addresses all Christians, but in particular the members of the DRC family. It argues that if we want to bury the past, we must properly share and confess it first. The only proper way for the *familia Dei* is God's way. Christians need not be compelled to acknowledge their complicity and guilt; they should do so willingly so that their confessional act will really be transformative and therapeutic in effect.

Confession enacts a move from silence to expression just as the silence of the confessional stall is broken by the announcement of guilt. This article understands confession as a first person narrative account by either a fictional or historical speaker who expresses the need to testify concerning and admit certain events in her/his actual life in order to construct or reconstruct a self in Christ within the *familia Dei*.

This means confession is always an act in the confessant's intention to realise her/himself in the community is the formal purpose that distinguishes confession from other self-expressions. This gives confession an ontologically characteristic motif, to establish identity and to uncover what was hidden or unconscious. As Doody says; "confession is the deliberate, self-conscious attempt of an individual to explain his/her nature to the audience who represents the kind of community s/he needs to exist in and to confirm her/him" (Doody, 1980:4-5).

Confession consciously directs itself towards an identifiable family of God or audience and has a particular motivation for doing so. It is not mere introspection or self-assertion. The family or audience receives the confession about both the self and the past. However, the community is expected to attend to both the guilt and shame and in doing so to incorporate the confessant back into itself. This community should also reaffirm the posited identity. The confession is thus both a communicative as well as a performative speech-act.

1.4.1. Acts within confession

1.4.1.1. Remembrance and sharing

In the Christian tradition remembering is a fundamental form of loving. Christian liturgy is rooted in remembering. For example God urges us to remember, to commemorate, and the congregation is reminded and exhorted to remember, to celebrate and to change. This is evident when the Lord taught and told His disciples to celebrate the Eucharist in His remembrance (Luke 22:19). The apostle Paul also reminds his congregation in Corinth that every Sunday the Christian commemorates the resurrection of the Lord because He was raised

¹¹ For Smit, confession literally means to acknowledge, to agree with God's judgement on your nature, your distinctive identity, your particular past, your personal deeds. (Smit, 1995:3).

For Gallagher, moreover, confession is a locutionary act, or utterance, capable of performing several different illocutionary acts. Thus, the locution "I ate the cheese" depending on the situation and context, can describe, admit, thank, disclose, acknowledge, boast, complain, or even ask pardon. In its Christian theological origins, a confession is the illocutionary act of acknowledging guilt –both in testifying to the actions of others who have provided help, to whom one is inguilty, and in admitting one's shortcomings, naming one's own inguiltyness. (Gallagher, 2002: xiv).

For Breytenbach, moreover, confession entails the factual information, that is, the "Mr. I" of the confessant is often the "Mr Eye" of the observer and chronicler.

According to Douglas, finally, confession means to declare publicly a personal relationship with and allegiance to God. It is an act of open joyful commitment made to God in the presence of the world, by which a congregation or individuals bind themselves in loyalty to God or Jesus. (Douglas, 1982:224-225).

from the dead on the first day of the week.

It is in this fundamental form of loving that Christians love each other. It is human nature to love only those with whom a person is prepared to share his/her story and in whose story that person wants to have a share. Only those who share memories and hopes really belong together. Therefore, where human beings do not share in the same past there can be no real community, and where community is to be formed common memory must be created. The measure of distantiating of members of communities and families can be taken by noting the divergence, the separateness and lack of sympathy evidenced by their social memories. Conversely the measure of their unity is the extent to which they share a common memory.

From the aforesaid it is equally clear that in the Christian tradition remembering and sharing are not just simple matters. But even so they are an integral part of the Christians' past, their stories, and their identities. Hence the remembering and sharing also include real stories of hurt inflicted on one another, and of guilt.

It is in this light that the well known Black theologian, James Cone¹², claims that telling one another about memories, stories and experiences is the only way in which ideological gulfs between people, groups and communities may be bridged and done away with. This suggests that human beings do not really know what they have done and are still doing to one another. They have no idea of the effect of their actions on other human beings, not even on those who are the closest to them. They will only come to know when they tell stories of memories; that is, when they confess. Since confession forms an integral part of the Christian's life a brief discussion of the role of confession in the history church of Christ follows.

2. CONFESSION IN THE HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF CHRIST

Confession was a common practice in the early Christian church. It served relieve the confessant from distress. The form of confession changed from time to time as illustrated below.

2.1. Genealogy of confession

In the history of the early Christian church confession was a significant aspect of the Christian life. In the early Christian church the function of confession was two-fold "the practice of confession involved the acknowledgement of a guilt and took the form of two complementary declaratory acts: disclosing guilt and furnishing testimony" (Gallagher, 2002:3).

These two senses of confession are inextricably connected. The confessant admits her/his moral deficiencies and acknowledges debtedness to God's grace despite transgression against God and neighbour. Such acknowledgement of guilt and transgression relieved the confessant of the associated anxiety and distress. So the life of the confessant is transformed through the function of confession. Jung appears to go some way in sharing this view when he said that Roman Catholic patients should go to confession because the "immediate experience of the patient might easily be too much for *her/him*" (Jung, 1983:53). "Certainly going to confession might relieve the patient" (Hutch, 1994:341). This means confession holds a certain status within the Christian life and community.

¹² "Indeed, when I understand truth as story, I am more likely to be open to other people's truth stories. As I listen to other stories, I am invited to move out of the subjectivity of my own story into another realm of thinking and acting. The same is true for others when I tell my story.... Indeed, it is only when we refuse to listen to another story that our own story becomes ideological, that is, a closed system incapable of hearing the truth" (Cone, 1975:103-104).

2.2. Status of confessing

2.2.1 Early Christian church

In the early Christian church the act of confession, especially during the time of St. Augustine¹³, was "...oral, public and voluntary..." (Gallagher, 2002:4) and it was regarded as therapeutic for the confessant and the *familia Dei* as a whole. The confessant, as member of the *familia Dei*, was not ashamed to acknowledge her/his guilt in front of the other family members and before the Triune God. Even if the confessant did transgress against one of the *familia Dei* members the confessant voluntarily confessed it before the family as well as in the presence of the Father and the Son. This also helped to bind the members of the *familia Dei* together and helped to ensure the health of the whole body of believers. Confession was therapeutic for the early Christian church.

2.2.2. Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages the church became the dominant social institution. Consequently the act of confession remained prominent so that it even became "a formal sacrament" (Gallagher, 2002:54).

2.2.3 Fourth Lateran Council: Roman Catholic Church

This Council was the greatest of the Medieval Councils. It was held in 1215. It was called by the greatest of the medieval popes, namely Innocent III¹⁴, to plan for the "regaining of the Holy Land and reform of the whole Church" (Leith, 1982:56). For our purpose Canon XXI is significant. This Canon "requires all those who have reached the age of reason to confess once a year to a parish priest" (Leith, 1982:56). The following points demonstrate how the act of confession was made compulsory and how it privatised by the Fourth Lateran Council:

1. **Private confession:** The emphasis of this Canon is on private¹⁵ confession. Believers who did not come to privately confess their transgressions before the year expired: (a) were prohibited access to the church while alive, and (b) were denied Christian burial when they died.
2. **Confessing to local priest:** The believers were only allowed to confess to their own priest. A good reason was needed to gain permission to confess to another priest.

13 St. Augustine (354-430) was a Christian theologian and one of the Latin Fathers of the church.

14 Innocent III: Pope 1198-1216, who was trained in both theology and law, brought the medieval papacy to the height of its prestige and power. He crowned Otto IV as Holy Roman emperor, but Otto's determination to unite Germany and Sicily angered him and in 1212 he gave his support to the Hohenstaufen candidate, Frederick II. After Innocent excommunicated King John of England for refusing to recognise Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury, John was obliged to submit and declared England a fief of the Holy See (1213). Innocent launched the Fourth Crusade, which captured Constantinople, and the Albigensian Crusade, which attempted to suppress heresy in southern France. He approved the Mendicant orders founded by St Dominic and St. Francis of Assisi, and he convoked the Fourth Lateran Council, which promulgated the doctrine of transubstantiation and endorsed annual confession for all Christians.

15 Study Canon XXI of the Fourth Lateran Council states that, "all believers of both sexes shall after coming to the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins...in private to their own priest" (Leith, 1982:58-59). Private confession was done "at least once a year" (Leith, 1982:59). The function of confession according to the Council has to do with receiving the sacrament of the Eucharist at Easter. It is on such a basis that the believers after confession have to strive to the best of their ability to fulfil the penance imposed upon them.

3. **Role of the priest:** The diligence and cautiousness of the priest in healing the patient paralleled that of the “skilled physician” (Leith, 1982:59). Again, for the priest to understand wisely what to advise the patient, he had to diligently inquire “into the circumstances both of the sinner and of the sin” (Leith, 1982:59). This would empower the priest to rightly know “what remedy he has to apply, trying different tests to heal the confessant” (Leith, 1982:59).

The Council made confession compulsory and private; “all believers” were compelled to come in private to the priest and confess their transgressions “at least once a year.” It was no longer voluntary. Believers were anxious and feared judgement in their lifetime. Firstly, the phrase “prohibited access” may be interpreted as excommunication for those who did not come to confess in a particular year. Secondly, the phrase “denied Christian burial” is the judgement that the Medieval Catholicism already imposed upon believers who did not confess their guilt. These two points blatantly ignore the need for pastoral comfort for both the confessant and confessor. Moreover these two points ignore the fact of practical life in that “no one lives a pure and holy life, with clean hands” (Smit, 1995:7). Thirdly, this private confession was sacramental because it entitled a person to celebrate the Eucharist on Easter but it left a person out of in-homeness and out of fellowship with the Lord and fellow brothers and sisters at the table of the Eucharist¹⁶. In such circumstances integrity of the therapeutic function of confession is largely absent.

2.2.4 Implications of the Fourth Lateran Council

The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 changed the whole nature and function of confession. The Council codified the sacrament of penance which then replaced the voluntary oral public confession in favour of compulsory private auricular confession. This had implications for the *familia Dei*.

2.2.4.1 Creation of hiatus: It meant distancing in the *familia Dei*, one from another. Now all other members of the *familia Dei* were excluded from one's act of confession. A strange spiritual individualism began to predominate among the children of God of the *familia Dei* to the detriment of fellowship in favour of self-centredness.

This aspect of individualism in the confession processes deprived the confessant of the communal relationship and fellowship and of the sense of God's presence in the expression or

¹⁶ Douglas et al, define sacrament, as accepted by the Reformed and Catholic church, as “an outward and visible sign, ordained by Christ, setting forth and pledging an inward and spiritual blessing” (Douglas et al, 1982:1044). Accordingly a sacrament is a religious action-symbol-and-sign of the presence of God. It is believed that His presence is transmitted through material signs or elements or the performance of ritual. This does not mean that the symbols or signs of the Eucharist, namely bread and wine can be transubstantiated into the real body and blood of Jesus Christ but they are signs of the broken body and shared blood of Jesus Christ.

According to the Roman Catholic Church the bread and wine of the Eucharist become, in substance, the body and blood of Jesus, though their appearance is not altered. This transformation is thought to bring the literal Christ being present to the participants. The doctrine was first elaborated by theologians in the thirteenth century and was incorporated into documents of the Council of Trent. In the mid-twentieth century, some Roman Catholic theologians interpret it as referring to a change of meaning rather than a change of substance, but in 1965 Pope Paul VI called for the retention of the original dogma teaching transubstantiation.

declaration of forgiveness. The forgiveness formula for the communal public confession had been “May the Lord absolve thee” (Gallagher, 2002:5). The emphasis in this formula is upon the Lord. All that the *familia Dei* was doing was to supplicate that the Lord may grant the confessant His absolution.

2.2.4.2 Interference of confessor: This Council introduced the priest as the only individual among the members of the *familia Dei* who could hear the confessant acknowledging her/his guilt. The priest alone was the confessor. This emphasis also neglects the humanness of the priest in that even the pope needs a confessor. Smit in criticising this negligent emphasis on the priest as the only confessor over against the community, says, “in our reactions to the guilt of others we too become guilty through what we do or do not do, say or do not say, neglect or do not neglect” (Smit, 1995:7). Although the priest was depicted as “representative of the community” (Gallagher, 2002:5) in actual fact the priest was the only¹⁷ one involved in the confession processes besides the confessant.

The manifestation of pastoral comfort and encounter for the act of confession by the confessant seems to be lacking in the privatisation of confession prescribed by the Fourth Lateran Council. In such circumstances, where there is no fellowship, the function of confession cannot be therapeutic. The Reformed took a different approach.

2.3 Protestant Reformation

It is clear from the above that auricular confession before a priest was no improvement on the earlier practice. It was one issue that the Reformation sought to address. Consequently there was a noticeable change in the nature and function of confession as conducted during the Reformation. Confession among the Lutherans will be discussed while the Calvinistic view of confession will also be briefly mentioned.

2.3.1. Augsburg Confession: Lutheran Church

2.3.1.1 Study XXV Confession

In 1530 the Lutheran Church adopted the Augsburg Confession as a defence against and correction of the abuse in Study XI of the Fourth Lateran Council. At least two aspects stand out: 1. the private confession, and 2. sacramentality of confession

Now the outstandingly agreeing of Study XI to Canon XXI of the Fourth Lateran Council is explained.

1. **Private confession:** This study teaches that “private absolution should be retained (Leith, 1982:71). But the difference is that Study XXV emphasise the privacy to “confess the Lord God, the Judge, in your prayer, telling Him of your sins not with your tongue but in your conscience” (Leith, 1982:87).
2. **Sacramentality of confession:** Study XXV explains, “the custom has been retained among us [Lutherans] of not administering the sacrament to those who have not previously been examined and absolved (Leith, 1982:86). This means that the Eucharist could only be administered to those who have been examined in a process of acknowledging one’s

¹⁷ This is clear from the new formula of forgiveness: “I absolve thee” (Gallagher, 2002:5). Here the priest uses the first person singular personal pronoun “I”. This emphasises the authority of the priest in granting absolution rather than the authority of the Lord in the midst of His family, as before. During the confession processes the presiding priest’s presence was depersonalized by being “hidden behind a screen or his face turned away” (2002:5).

transgressions.

- 3. Role of the confessor:** In the phrase or expression “those who have not previously been examined” the term “examined” suggests that a confessor as a role to play in the processes of acknowledging guilt. This means that

the confessant confesses to the confessor¹⁸ and the latter gives absolution.

The Anglican and Reformed tradition agreed that “auricular confession was no longer recognized as a sacrament” (Gallagher, 2002:5), yet the Anglican Church continued with the practice of auricular confession on a “limited basis” (Gallagher, 2002:2). John Calvin, on the other hand, re-emphasised the communal aspect of confession “by casting the recitation into the first-person plural: we have sinned” (2002:5). Hutch agrees and puts it as follows: “insofar as a priest is supposed to act as some sort of judge when hearing confessions, he can be of little use...a patient does not feel accepted unless the very worst is accepted” (1994:343).

2.4 Reformed liturgies

2.4.1. Transformative function

According to the Christian doctrine of original sin every one, from infancy, is drawn into a spider’s web of flawed relationships, mutual suffering and common guilt. No one lives a pure and holy life with clean hands, even though each differs from the other in different degrees because some do one thing and others do another. The fact is that no one is simply all good or all bad.

Christians attend worship services, conducted liturgically. According to Wainwright “worship is the point of concentration at which the whole of the Christian life comes into ritual focus” (Wainwright, 1980: 8). Senn declares that “liturgy is the church’s public presentation of its beliefs and enactment of its life” (Senn, 1997: xiii). This means it is in the liberative liturgy wherein and whereby the church proclaims and celebrates the good news of sharing in stories and truths, forgiveness, reconciliation and the realization of new life in Christ. It is on these bases that the function of confession in the liturgy will be discussed.

The function of confession in Reformed liturgies should involve both celebration and lamentation. It expresses culpability and penitence through statements of both fact and intention or motive. Such statements suggest the transformative function of confession in anticipating therapeutic interventions¹⁹. Thus Jennings sees confession as a facet, a component of the liberative liturgy. It makes a child of God to know the sin that has been confessed and from which the child has been absolved. This means no one sees the problem

18 The participation of the confessor is further suggested in this sentence “we [the Lutherans] also teach that God requires us to believe this absolution as much as if we heard God’s voice from heaven...we should know that through such faith we [the Lutheran confessants] obtain forgiveness of sins” (Leith, 1982:87).

The Fifth Study of the Lutheran Small Catechism of 1529 is explicit in explaining the second part of the confession. It says “we receive absolution or forgiveness from the confessor as from God Himself” (Leith, 1982:121).

19 Jennings correctly portrays this therapeutic function when he says: - “in the act of confession, we become those who ‘see clearly’ both ourselves and the world in which we are implicated. This clarifying of our perception occurs, let us remember, in the light of the hoped-for liberation. The confession of sins is the point at which we identify the ways we need and require what God promises for us and for the world. In the confession of sin, we act out this awareness. Thus, indirectly, we describe ourselves as those who were blind but are now beginning to see” (1998:67-68).

until the person has been provided with its solution.

According to Müller the therapeutic function of confession “is never an excuse, nor only the banishment of illusion, self-deception, dishonesty or hypocrisy by which we hide from God or our neighbour, but the realization of a new world in Christ” (2002:40). This realization of the new world through the act of self-disclosure is what 1 John teaches when it says “if we confess our sins, He is *faithful and just*, and will forgive our sins and *cleanse* us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). This cleansing transforms the dysfunctional nature of the confessant soteriologically.

Clearly then, guilt is not primarily located in what we do or have done, in isolated deeds but in the person her/himself, in his/her nature, in his/her being and identity. What Christians are fundamentally facing in their dysfunctional nature is not what and how they do things but who they are.

It is on this basis that the realization of the new world in Christ is possible on condition that the function of “confession deals with sin, sin in its vertical and horizontal aspects which touches those near to us, those who are vulnerable and can be hurt” (Müller, 2002:41). 1 John 4:20 further emphasizes that the realization of a new world in Christ is hindered when children born of God say they love God but hate their brother or sister.

Hutch states that this idea is supported by the liturgical greeting words: “let us prepare for the celebration of the Eucharist and confess our sins to God” (1994:344). In the liturgy for the Eucharist celebration the members of the URCSA are invited “to confess individual sins and the social sins” (URCSA, 1999:10) to prepare to encounter the Christ who is the Son in this *familia Dei* at His holy Table. In other words, let the hearts be transformed and prepared before the encounter with Jesus Christ at His Table.

Pastoral psychotherapy emphasises the fact that the transgressions that are to be confessed in liturgies are those which bring disorder into the fabric of the *familia Dei* when not confessed. Müller includes disharmony between individuals, married couples, disputing families and clans among them. Acts of transgression may either be against the Father and the Son or against fellow human beings; in fact they are always both. They spoil the whole fellowship. It is in this context that the therapeutic and transformative function of confession builds strong ties of fellowship.

Cone sees the function of confession in the *familia Dei* as both transformative and therapeutic when properly conducted. It makes plain that the turbulent real life situation in the *familia Dei* needs to be transformed and healed.

For Cone not to confess closes one up and causes a person to be incapable of hearing the truth from other stories. That is why, according to Müller, “a wrong once committed, even in private, is a disorder that is introduced into the social or *familia Dei* fabric” (2002:41). That is why Müller advocates a shift from auricular confession and re-emphasises John Calvin’s view of voluntary communal or public confession. Müller points out that the reparatory function of confession “must be public, must be a community affair” (2002:41). From this it is equally clear that in order for the function of confession to be transformative and therapeutic, confession must embody the aspects of otherness and intimacy within the *familia Dei*. In the Christian tradition the act of confession is not a simple individual matter but a matter of the “we/us”.

2.5 Confession: A communal praxis

Müller’s view is reflected clearly in Jonker’s²⁰ vicarious confession and action, including

²⁰ “I confess before you and before the Lord, not only my own sin and guilt, and my personal responsibil-

acceptance of guilt. Müller also implies that this communal element in confession is not a simple matter. Van der Walt agrees when he says: "in spite of the fact that confession of guilt is difficult it is the only way to rid oneself of the burden of guilt. There is no other way to be relieved of the burden, and to truly breathe freely again" (Van der Walt, 1996:16). It is this difficulty-relief relationship that makes "confession of guilt one of those characteristics which distinguishes Christianity from other religions and ideologies" (1996:17).

For the DRC family an integral part of its past, its stories and its identity, is the story of pain inflicted on the members of the family and of the guilt of the family members. Among the pain inflicted by the DRC on other family members was that which came with "Christian" Apartheid. This is acknowledged by the DRC when it decided "irrespective of how it might have been practiced or experienced Apartheid in itself is wrong and sinful...also in its fundamental nature" (Botha, 1998: 14).

Gallagher sees that the DRC confession²¹ has left out the openness. Hence her confession lacks the transformative and therapeutic function embodiment. What Gallagher means here is fundamental to the concept of openness suggested by both Müller and Cone. If the DRC disregards the central significance embodied in the naming of transgression in the process of self-disclosure and also in the transformative and therapeutic function of confession, she misses her identity as a Christian church. Although she cannot be forced to confess her guilt, she must be reminded that her guilt is not only horizontal but vertical as well (1 John 4:20). Her missing of the rhythm of being a Christian church results in disequilibrium in the *familia Dei*. Such disequilibrium means a lack of a sense of belonging with the Triune God and neighbourhood.

Readiness and ability to confess is a basic Christian virtue. If the Christian community is a community of character, as many people would like to call it, a community in which people with a certain kind of character, vision, virtue and values are cultivated and formed, then the virtue of being able to confess must surely be one of their most important characteristics.

3. CONFESSION AS A CHALLENGE TO THE DRC FAMILY

The DRC created and developed the policies of Apartheid and implemented Apartheid within the *familia Dei*. There are, currently, discussions within the family to combat the disunity within it. This is because these members of the *familia Dei* experience a lack of in-homeness with the Triune God and with each other. Here these two facts will only be mentioned in passing for

ity for the political, social, economic and structural wrongs that have been done to many of you and the results of which you and your whole country are still suffering from, but vicariously I dare also to do that in the name of the NGK of which I am a member, and for the Afrikaans people as a whole. I have the liberty to do just that, because the NGK at its latest synod has declared apartheid a sin and confessed its own guilt of negligence in not warning against it and distancing itself from it long ago" (Johnston and Sampson, 1994: 198).

21 Gallagher puts it this way: "The DRC played a crucial role in the development of the Siamese twins of Afrikaner nationalism and Apartheid. The Afrikaners who founded the National Party saw themselves as the Chosen People; a 'new Israel' expressly selected to advance the cause of Christian civilisation. They believed that each ethnic group was a distinct 'social sphere' that should develop separately from other groups. The DRC and its theologians contributed to the development of a powerful civil religion that promoted and justified the Apartheid system by means of its confessions of faith. Identity was at the heart of this system, as Afrikaners created clear binary categories of 'us' and 'them', the elect and reprobate, the Chosen and the Other" (Gallagher, 2002:38).

lack of space, but it is acknowledged that the processes are much more complex than these few words might suggest.

This lack of belonging within the *familia Dei* is in evidence according to Botman from DRC Synod's decision²² that "sin is not vested in an issue but in the attitude of a person's heart and his action" (Botman, www.warc.ch.dcw/bs25/05.html#2). It simply suggests that sin is not vested in the policies of Apartheid but in the hearts and attitudes of human beings. It further means that for the re-unification of the DRC family to take its place all that is required is that committed members of the DRC should transform their hearts and there are also some cognitive and practical issues that need to be changed and then the family will experience therapy.

The Seoul Conference of the WARC²³ rejected these theoretical confessions of the DRC and called member churches to a faithful praxis. In South Africa, living as people of God and demonstrating in Christian daily living and service the praxis of the therapeutic function of confession reflected the stance of the confessional movement. This was publically and ecumenically explained in 1985 when fifty theologians from numerous Christian traditions, including a hand full of Reformed theologians, published the *Kairos Document*²⁴.

Relevant here is that the function of confession in its therapeutic action, is the praxis of confession of transgressions against God, such as lack of faith, but also of transgressions committed against fellow Christians. Such confession is born from a new insight about what is right in the eyes of the Triune God and good for the *familia Dei*. For such confession the only begotten Son promises cleansing from all unrighteousness.

3.1. Confession strengthens relationships

Therefore Müller correctly emphasizes that the transformative and therapeutic function embodied in confession is really and meaningfully complete only when it lists and names the confessant's transgressions, in both the "vertical and horizontal" (2002:41) relationships of the *familia Dei*. Binding together the *familia Dei* also involves "naming the transgression... because names have power... and with wrong names we can't deal appropriately with ourselves or with one another ... Therefore confession is a *therapeutic practice in naming*" (Jennings,

22 According to Botman, WARC, Abrahams, De Gruchy and Villa-Vicenco, and also Cloete and Smit, the DRC at a certain point has to leave this position and decide whether the political model being practiced within the DRC family of partitioning is sinful and unacceptable to the Christian conscience, and is really a forced division of people which unjustly favoured one group over against another and so violated the biblical principles of human dignity, love and justice. Another theoretical confession by the DRC, according to Botman, is that of "rejecting racism in all its forms as contrary to the Word of God." In the view of Van der Walt, Ross, Peters, MÜLLER, Brooks, and Rutland the therapeutic and transformative function of confession will be really meaningful and have sense only when the theories and decisions are translated into faithful praxis.

23 The Seoul Conference of the WARC rejected these theoretical confessions of the DRC and called member churches to a faithful praxis by saying, "The churches which have accepted Reformed confessions of faith have therefore committed themselves to live as people of God and to show in their daily life and service what this means. This commitment requires concrete manifestation of community among races, of common witness to justice and equality in society and of unity at the table of the Lord. The Nederduitse Gereformeerde Kerk and Nederduitse Hervormde Kerk in not only accepting, but also actively justifying the Apartheid system by misusing the gospel and the Reformed confessions, contradicts in doctrine and in action the promise, which they profess to believe" (WARC, 1989 Seoul).

24 The Kairos Document is a theological declaration of faith in which both Apartheid and a "state theology" that embraced injustices were condemned.

1988:66-67). The therapeutic function “offered by the confession is at its most meaningful when sin and guilt are given a clear label” (Kettunen, 2002:17).

Both confession and absolution of transgression are meaningless and have no impact if the confessant does not relate properly to God and neighbour. These are the vital relationships within the *familia Dei* according to 1 John.

For Field, Goldstone, Van Wyck, together with Best, and Gassman, fellowship is the *sine qua non* for the facilitation of any truly transformative and therapeutic confession. The maintenance of an effective therapeutic for the *familia Dei* is essential to proper family relationships and responsibilities. Without sufficiently strong family relationships and responsibilities the intensity and depth of the transformative and therapeutic processes will leave much to be desired.

4. CONFESSION AS FAITHFUL PRAXIS

4.1. Exercise in name-giving

For the confessant to be able to name²⁵ the guilt, to be in agreement, to concur, to admit that the other is right she/he must allow the other to make known to her/him those things of the past which the confessant may be unaware of for whatever reason. This means the faithful confessional praxis is an exercise in name-giving allowing the other to give name(s) to such guilt as the confessant may have forgotten or not be aware of. The confessant confesses her/his guilt by naming²⁶ the transgressions.

Clearly, words alone will not do. Complementing the expressed truth in formulated confessions there must also be a faithful confessional praxis. Faithful confession is confession expressed in praxis by both the act of confession and “the resultant deeds to remedy the situation” (Hibbard, 1992:491). It is imperative that the confessant takes that step. The confessant’s words without praxis will not suffice. 1 John teaches “let us not love in word or speech but in deed and truth” (1 John 3:18). Praxis must be impacted by confession “in all the dimensions of the life and witness of” (Moss, 1998:169) the confessant. An authentic faithful “confession is in obedience to Jesus Christ and it begins with the confession or acknowledgement of guilt” (Du Rand, 1979:30).

4.1.1. The case of the DRC

A faithful confessional praxis, based upon remembering, can only be therapeutic and transformative if it be a moral event. To be a faithful confessional praxis as a moral event it is imperative that committed Christians through Jesus Christ “can and must turn again and

25 With this in mind Jennings says: - “In the act of confession, we become those who see clearly both ourselves and the world in which we are implicated.... The confession of sins is the point at which we... describe ourselves as those who were blind but are now beginning to see.... In this seeing we also engage in naming.... So long as we use the wrong name for things, we cannot hope for freedom.... Names have power. They have the power to hold in bondage, to destroy and maim.... With the wrong names we can't deal appropriately with ourselves or with one another... confession is practice in naming...” (Jennings, 1998:662).

26 Jennings says, “The corporate practice of confession teaches us to see. It teaches us to see ourselves in the light of God’s action and promise. The practice of confession is practice in the banishment of illusion, of self-deception, of dishonesty. It is practice in honesty, in telling the truth. The words we use here in public serve as barrier against the practice of deceit, hypocrisy, and self-deception by which we hide ourselves from God, from our neighbour, from ourselves.... Together and aloud we confess our sins by name. These are our sins we confess. We are not here describing someone else” (Jennings, 1988:661).

again to history, making the sins and faiths of their fathers and brothers their own faiths and sins" (Smit, 1995:5). This means that the DRC of this generation must indicatively confess all the atrocities and pain inflicted and accept guilt for the effects of implementation of the 1857²⁷ decision of the DRC Synod to separate worship services. This generation should overtly rescind this decision before the Triune God, the DRC Family, and His ecumenical church.

Separate provision for worship and association subsequently resulted in the establishment of the different churches according to a racial classification, for example, the DRMC for Coloureds in 1881, the RFA for Indians and the DRCA²⁸ for Blacks in 1963.

4.1.2. Church as confessant

It is only when the church recognizes her "failure and brokenness" (Johnston, 2003:9) that she can contribute in a meaningful way to the transformation of human hearts and to therapeutic behaviour in practice. It is acknowledged that the church is fallible and broken. This is so. But this is no license for the church to be idolatrously complacent. The Son of God is the Saviour of the *familia Dei* and the church is His fallible and sinful instrument. In grace the Son of God yet utilizes the church for pastoral psychotherapeutic intervention to minister to the distressed through the transformative therapeutic and faithful praxis that comes with true confession. While constraints of space forbid a detailed exploration, the following three points are inescapable: -

1. The church is called to be a model of the normativity she proclaims.
2. The church is called to participate in God's soteriological action, that is, the transformative therapeutic faithful praxis action.
3. The pastoral psychotherapeutic intervention of the church must include a focus on the function of confession.

CONCLUSION

It needs to be said that we do not really know what we have done and are still doing to one another. We have no idea of the effect of our actions on others, not even on those who are the closest to us. Still the transformative therapeutic and faithful praxis of confession continues to help us to interpret the past, the present and the future. Without it we interpret all three in terms of the evil images of our hearts that would have us believe that everything revolves around us.

The pastoral psychotherapeutic function of confession enables us to break through these evil interpretations. The pastoral psychotherapeutic view of confession vividly demonstrates

27 This is the decision which the DRC used to uphold "the Afrikaners' traditional belief in racial differences" (Rhodie and Venter, 1989: 160). Consequently, according to Rhodie and Venter as well as Louise Kretzschmar, the Cape Synod of the DRC in 1857 decided on the issue of separate services for individual communities if the 'circumstances could justify' that. But according to Kretzschmar, what was intended as a temporary measure became a rule: "The Synod (DRC) considers it desirable and Scriptural that our members from the Heathen be received and absorbed into our existing congregations wherever possible; but where this measure, as a result of the weakness of some, impedes the furtherance of the cause of Christ among the Heathen, the congregation from the Heathen, already founded or still to be founded, shall enjoy its Christian privileges in a separate building or institution" (1986:2).

28 The DRCA (Dutch Reformed Church in Africa) denomination grouping before 1963 was further separated according to ethnic communities; that is, there was the Dutch Reformed 'Bantu' Church for Sothos, Xhosas, Zulus, just to mention a few. Then in 1963, at Kroonstad, these separate denominations/churches decided to amalgamate and group themselves as DRCA.

that confession implies an all-encompassing outlook on life, the world and its meaning that generates its own agenda which, even if reluctantly, we must continue to follow.

Honest pastoral confession keeps the family ties tight. Communication within the *familia Dei* will be open. Estrangement and alienation are anathema within the family. The faithful praxis of confession is not a simple matter because it is fragile and “accompanied by innumerable risks” (Abrahams, 1997:45). It is a process in which no stakeholder can force another’s praxis. It puts the confessant at risk. Confession should not be done for opportunistic reasons. It should emanate from the heart.

Fellowship in the *familia Dei* is what the members of the *familia Dei* live for and must demonstrate in their daily life. But this fellowship diminishes if wrongs, distrusts and misgivings grow within the *familia Dei*. The therapeutic function of confession serves to keep the *familia Dei*, as a unit, whole. The DRC family should remember that authentic fellowship is where individualism and selfishness are transcended and where human creativity is given scope.

Let us [*as DRC family*] pray for such a day, let us work positively towards such a day, and let us in the meantime, through our confession and example, give visible expression to and proof of that fellowship and in-homeness with the Triune God and fellow Christians.

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