

The Watchtower Society teaches that Elders are NOT authorized to forgive sins, and that Elders CANNOT grant absolution. The Watchtower Society teaches that ONLY God and Jesus can forgive sins. The Watchtower Society teaches that you should make a confession to the Elders in order to get spiritual advice and help and for the Elders to pray with you.

The Watchtower, August 15, 2001 Issue, Page 30:

· Since Jehovah is the one who can forgive our sins, why do Christians confess serious sins to the older men in the congregation?

Yes, it is Jehovah's forgiveness of serious sins that a Christian needs to seek. (2 Samuel 12:13) But just as the prophet Nathan provided help for David, mature older men in the congregation can help remorseful sinners. Going to the elders is in line with the direction given at James 5:14, 15.-6/1, page 31.

The Watchtower, June 1, 2001 Issue, Pages 30-31:

Questions From Readers

In view of Jehovah's willingness to forgive sins by the merit of the ransom sacrifice, why is it necessary for Christians to confess to the older men in the congregation?

As can be seen in the case of David and Bath-sheba, Jehovah forgave David's sin, grave though it was, because of David's genuine repentance. When the prophet Nathan approached him, David openly confessed: "I have sinned against Jehovah."-2 Samuel 12:13.

However, Jehovah not only accepts a sinner's sincere confession and extends forgiveness but he also makes loving provisions to help the erring one progress to spiritual recovery. In David's case, the help came through the prophet Nathan. Today, in the Christian congregation, there are spiritually mature older men, or elders. The disciple James explains: "Is there anyone [spiritually] sick among you? Let him call all the older men of the congregation to him, and let them pray over him, greasing him with oil in the name of Jehovah. And the prayer of faith will make the indisposed one well, and Jehovah will raise him up. Also, if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him."-James 5:14, 15.

Skillful elders can do much to ease the pain of heart that is felt by the remorseful sinner. They strive to imitate Jehovah in their dealings with him. They never want to be harsh, even though strong discipline may be warranted. Rather, they compassionately consider the immediate needs of the individual. Patiently they strive to readjust the erring one's thinking by using God's Word. (Galatians 6:1) Even if a person does not voluntarily confess his sin, he may still be moved to repentance when approached by the elders, as David was when approached by Nathan. The support thus rendered by the elders helps the erring one to avoid the danger of repeating the sin and the serious consequences of becoming a hardened practitioner of sin.- Hebrews 10:26-31.

It is certainly not easy to confess to others deeds that one feels ashamed of and to seek forgiveness. It takes inner strength. Reflect for a moment, though, on the alternative. One man who failed to reveal his serious sin to the elders in the congregation said: "I felt a pain in my heart that would not go away. I increased my efforts in the preaching work, but the sickening feeling remained." He felt that confession to God in prayer was enough, but clearly it was not, for he experienced feelings similar to King David's. (Psalm 51:8, 11) How much better to accept the loving assistance that Jehovah provides through the elders!

The Watchtower, November 15, 1997 Issue, Pages 23-24:

19 We may not feel like singing if we are ailing spiritually, perhaps because of wrong conduct or a failure to feed regularly at Jehovah's table. If we are in that state, let us humbly call for the elders so that they may 'pray over us.' (Proverbs 15:29) They will also 'grease us with oil in Jehovah's name.' As soothing oil on a wound, their comforting words and Scriptural counsel will help to allay depression, doubt, fear. 'The prayer of faith will make us well' if it is backed up by our own faith. If the elders find that our spiritual sickness was caused by serious sin, they will kindly make clear our error and try to help us. (Psalm 141:5) And if we are repentant, we can have faith that God will hear their prayers and forgive us.

20 'Openly confessing our sins to one another' should serve as a restraint against sinning further. It should foster mutual compassion, a quality that will move us to "pray for one another." We can have faith that this will be beneficial because prayer by 'a righteous man'-one exercising faith and viewed as upright by God-accomplishes much with Jehovah. (1 Peter 3:12) The prophet Elijah had weaknesses like ours, but his prayers were effective. He prayed, and it did not rain for three and a half years. When he prayed again, rain did fall.-1 Kings 17:1; 18:1, 42-45; Luke 4:25.

21 What if a member of the congregation is "misled from the truth," deviating from right teaching and conduct? We may be able to turn him back from his error through Bible counsel, prayer, and other help. If we succeed, this keeps him under Christ's ransom and saves him from spiritual death and condemnation to destruction. By helping the erring one, we cover a multitude of his sins. When the reprovved sinner turns from

his wrong course, repents, and seeks forgiveness, we will rejoice that we worked toward the covering over of his sins.-Psalm 32:1, 2; Jude 22, 23.

Awake!, January 22, 1997 Issue, Page 12:

Should I Confess My Sins?

Calling on the Elders

If you are a Christian, the matter does not end with telling your parents. Says Andrew: "I knew I had to take my problem to the congregation elders. What a relief it was to know that they were there to help me!" Yes, youths among Jehovah's Witnesses can and should go to the congregation elders for help and encouragement. But why can't you simply pray to Jehovah and leave it at that? Because Jehovah has entrusted the elders with the responsibility of "keeping watch over your souls." (Hebrews 13:17) They can help you avoid falling into sin again.-Compare James 5:14-16.

Do not deceive yourself by reasoning that you can help yourself. If you were really strong enough to do that, would you have fallen into sin in the first place? Clearly, you need to seek outside help. Andrew courageously did so. His advice? "I encourage anyone who is involved in a serious sin, or who has been, to open his heart to Jehovah and to one of his shepherds."

But just how do you approach an elder? Pick one with whom you feel reasonably comfortable. You could begin by saying: "I need to talk about something" or "I have a problem" or even "I have a problem and need your help." Your being honest and open will go a long way in demonstrating your repentance and desire to change. 'I'm Afraid of Being Disfellowshipped'

What about that possibility? It is true that committing a serious sin makes one liable to disfellowshipping, but not automatically. Disfellowshipping is for those who refuse to repent-who stubbornly refuse to change. Says Proverbs 28:13: "He that is covering over his transgressions will not succeed, but he that is confessing and leaving them will be shown mercy." The fact that you have approached the elders for help is evidence of your desire to change. Elders are primarily healers, not punishers. They are obliged to treat God's people with kindness and dignity. They want to help you make "straight paths for your feet."-Hebrews 12:13.

Admittedly, where deceit or a long-standing practice of serious wrong is involved, convincing "works that befit repentance" may be lacking. (Acts 26:20) Sometimes disfellowshipping does result. And even where a wrongdoer is repentant, the elders are obliged to impose some form of discipline. Should you become angry or embittered over their decision? At Hebrews 12:5, 6, Paul urges: "My son, do not belittle the discipline from Jehovah, neither give out when you are corrected by him; for whom Jehovah loves he disciplines; in fact, he scourges every one whom he receives as a son." Whatever discipline you receive, view it as evidence that God loves you. Remember, genuine repentance will restore you to a proper relationship with our merciful Father, Jehovah God.

It takes courage to own up to your mistakes. But by doing so, you can set matters straight not only with your parents but with Jehovah God himself. Do not let fear, pride, or embarrassment keep you from getting help. Remember: Jehovah "will forgive in a large way."-Isaiah 55:7.

The Watchtower, April 15, 1996 Issue, Pages 28-29:

Questions From Readers

Jesus said: "If you forgive the sins of any persons, they stand forgiven to them; if you retain those of any persons, they stand retained." Do these words mean that Christians can forgive sins?

There is no Scriptural basis for concluding that Christians in general, or even appointed elders in the congregations, have divine authority to forgive sins. Yet, what Jesus said to his disciples at John 20:23, quoted above, indicates that God granted the apostles special powers in this regard. And Jesus' statement there may relate to what he said at Matthew 18:18 about heavenly decisions.

Christians can forgive certain offenses, in line with the apostle Paul's counsel recorded at Ephesians 4:32: "Become kind to one another, tenderly compassionate, freely forgiving one another just as God also by Christ freely forgave you." Paul was here speaking about personal problems between Christians, such as careless talk. They should strive to settle these matters, forgiving one another. Recall Jesus' words: "If, then, you are bringing your gift to the altar and you there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, and go away; first make your peace with your brother, and then, when you have come back, offer up your gift."- Matthew 5:23, 24; 1 Peter 4:8.

However, the context of John 20:23 suggests that Jesus was referring to more serious sins, as indicated by what else he then said to this distinct audience. Let us see why.

On the day that he was resurrected, Jesus appeared to the disciples in a locked room in Jerusalem. The account says: "Jesus, therefore, said to them again: 'May you have peace. Just as the Father has sent me forth, I also am sending you.' And after he said this he blew upon them and said to them: 'Receive holy spirit. If you forgive the sins of any persons, they stand forgiven to them; if you retain those of any persons, they stand retained.'" -John 20:21-23.

Likely, the disciples mentioned were principally the faithful apostles. (Compare verse 24.) By blowing on them and saying, "Receive holy spirit," Jesus symbolically gave them notice that soon holy spirit would be poured out on them. Jesus went on to say that they would have authority concerning forgiveness of sins. Reasonably, his two statements are linked, one leading to the next.

Fifty days from his resurrection, on the day of Pentecost, Jesus poured out holy spirit. What did that accomplish? For one thing, those who received the spirit were born again as spiritual sons of God with the hope of being corulers with Christ in heaven. (John 3:3-5; Romans 8:15-17; 2 Corinthians 1:22) But that outpouring of spirit did more. Some recipients gained miraculous powers. By that means some could speak in foreign tongues that they did not know. Others could prophesy. Yet others could heal the sick or raise the dead to life.-1 Corinthians 12:4-11.

Since Jesus' words at John 20:22 pointed to this outpouring of holy spirit on the disciples, his connected words about forgiving sins seem to mean that the apostles had divinely provided to them through an operation of the spirit a unique authority to forgive or retain sins.-See The Watchtower, March 1, 1949, page 78.

The Bible does not give us a complete account of every time the apostles used such authority, but neither does it record every case when they used a miraculous gift to speak in tongues, to prophesy, or to heal.-2 Corinthians 12:12; Galatians 3:5; Hebrews 2:4.

One case that involved apostolic authority to forgive or retain sins involved Ananias and Sapphira, who played false to the spirit. Peter, who heard Jesus utter what we read at John 20:22, 23, exposed Ananias and Sapphira. Peter first addressed Ananias, who died on the spot. When Sapphira later came in and kept up the falsehood, Peter proclaimed her judgment. Peter did not forgive her sin but said: "Look! The feet of those who buried your husband are at the door, and they will carry you out." She too died on the spot.-Acts 5:1-11.

In this instance the apostle Peter used special authority to express a definite retaining of sin, a miraculous knowledge that God would not pardon the sin of Ananias and Sapphira. The apostles also appear to have had superhuman insight into cases where they were sure that sins had been forgiven on the basis of Christ's sacrifice. So those spirit-empowered apostles could declare the forgiveness or retention of sins.

This is not to say that all spirit-anointed elders back then had such miraculous authority. We can see that from what the apostle Paul said about the man disfellowshipped from the Corinthian congregation. Paul did not say, 'I forgive that man's sins' or even, 'I know that the man has been forgiven in heaven, so accept him back.' Rather, Paul urged the entire congregation to forgive this reinstated Christian and show love for him. Paul added: "Anything you kindly forgive anyone, I do too."-2 Corinthians 2:5-11.

Once the man was reinstated into the congregation, all the Christian brothers and sisters could forgive in the sense of not holding against him what he had done. First, though, he would have to repent and be reinstated. How would that occur?

There are serious sins that congregation elders have to handle, such as stealing, lying, or gross immorality. They try to correct and reprove such wrongdoers, moving them to repentance. But if someone unrepentantly practices grave sin, these elders apply the divine direction to disfellowship the wrongdoer. (1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 11-13) What Jesus said at John 20:23 does not apply in such cases. These elders do not have miraculous gifts of the spirit, such as the ability to heal the physically sick or raise the dead; those gifts served their purpose in the first century and then ended. (1 Corinthians 13:8-10) Furthermore, elders today do not have divine authority to forgive serious wrongdoing in the sense of pronouncing a serious sinner clean in the eyes of Jehovah. This kind of forgiveness has to be on the basis of the ransom sacrifice, and only Jehovah can forgive on that basis.-Psalm 32:5; Matthew 6:9, 12; 1 John 1:9.

As in the case of the man in ancient Corinth, when a gross sinner refuses to repent, he has to be disfellowshipped. If he later repents and produces works befitting repentance, divine forgiveness is possible. (Acts 26:20) In such a situation, the Scriptures give the elders reason to believe that Jehovah has indeed forgiven the wrongdoer. Then, once the person is reinstated, the elders can help him spiritually to become firm in the faith. The others in the congregation can forgive in the same way the Corinthian Christians forgave the disfellowshipped man who was reinstated back then.

In handling matters this way, the elders do not make up their own standards of judgment. They apply Bible principles and closely follow Scriptural procedures that Jehovah set out. Hence, any forgiving or not forgiving on the part of the elders would be in the sense of Jesus' words at Matthew 18:18: "Truly I say to you men, Whatever things you may bind on earth will be things bound in heaven, and whatever things you may loose on earth will be things loosed in heaven." Their actions would simply reflect Jehovah's view of matters as presented in the Bible.

Consequently, what Jesus said, as recorded at John 20:23, is not in conflict with the rest of the Scriptures, but it indicates that the apostles had a special authorization regarding forgiveness, in line with their special role in the infancy of the Christian congregation.

Frank Wessling, writing in U.S. Catholic, describes the practice of confession as "an extremely simplified step-by-step guide, from check-off of common sins through memorized prayer of repentance to ritual act of token penance." Wessling's conclusion? "I'm convinced that Confession is good for the soul," he says. "But the way Catholics do it is a problem."

The Bible presents confession in a completely different manner. Most important is confession to God. (Psalm 32:1-5) And the Christian disciple James wrote: "Is there anyone sick among you? Let him call all the older men of the congregation to him, and let them pray over him, greasing him with oil in the name of Jehovah. Therefore openly confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may get healed."-James 5:14, 16.

A Christian burdened with sin can call the congregation overseers, who can give personal and practical counsel from the Bible to help the wrongdoer abandon his sinful course. The overseers can give appropriate encouragement as they monitor the progress of the one who is ailing spiritually. What a contrast to the formalistic ritual of confession practiced by churches today! Fortified by the personal assistance of congregation elders, repentant wrongdoers can gain the relief that David felt, as he expressed in a psalm: "My sin I finally confessed to you, and my error I did not cover. I said: 'I shall make confession over my transgressions to Jehovah.' And you yourself pardoned the error of my sins."-Psalm 32:5.

The Watchtower, January 1, 1995 Issue, Pages 27-31:

Determining Weakness, Wickedness, and Repentance

SIN is something that Christians hate—a falling short of Jehovah's righteous standards. (Hebrews 1:9)

Unhappily, all of us sin from time to time. All of us struggle with inherent weakness and imperfection. In most cases, though, if we confess our sins to Jehovah and earnestly try not to repeat them, we can approach him with a clean conscience. (Romans 7:21-24; 1 John 1:8, 9; 2:1, 2) We thank Jehovah that, on the basis of the ransom sacrifice, he accepts our sacred service despite our weaknesses.

If someone falls into serious sin because of fleshly weakness, he urgently needs shepherding in harmony with the procedure outlined at James 5:14-16: "Is there anyone [spiritually] sick among you? Let him call all the older men of the congregation to him . . . If he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him. Therefore openly confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may get healed."

Hence, when a dedicated Christian commits gross sin, something more than personal confession to Jehovah is needed. The elders must take certain steps, since the cleanness or the peace of the congregation is threatened. (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5:9-11; 6:9, 10) Elders may have to determine: Is the individual repentant? What led up to the sin? Was it the result of an isolated moment of weakness? Was it a practice of sin? Such determination is not always simple or clear-cut and demands considerable discernment. What, though, if the sin is because of pursuing a course of wrongdoing and wicked conduct? Then, the elders' responsibility is clear. When directing the handling of a serious matter in the Corinthian congregation, the apostle Paul said: "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves." (1 Corinthians 5:13) Wicked people have no place in the Christian congregation.

Weighing Weakness, Wickedness, and Repentance

How can elders know when someone is repentant? This is not a simple question. Think, for example, of King David. He committed adultery and then, in effect, murder. Yet, Jehovah allowed him to keep living. (2 Samuel 11:2-24; 12:1-14) Then think of Ananias and Sapphira. They lyingly tried to deceive the apostles, hypocritically pretending to be more generous than they really were. Serious? Yes. As bad as murder and adultery? Hardly! Yet, Ananias and Sapphira paid with their lives.—Acts 5:1-11.

Why the different judgments? David fell into serious sin because of fleshly weakness. When confronted with what he had done, he repented, and Jehovah forgave him—although he was severely disciplined with regard to problems in his household. Ananias and Sapphira sinned in that they hypocritically lied, trying to deceive the Christian congregation and thus 'play false to the holy spirit and to God.' That turned out to be evidence of a wicked heart. Hence, they were judged more severely.

In both cases Jehovah made the judgment, and his judgment was correct because he can examine hearts. (Proverbs 17:3) Human elders cannot do that. So how can elders discern whether a serious sin is evidence of weakness more than of wickedness?

In fact, all sin is wicked, but not all sinners are wicked. Similar sins may be evidence of weakness in one person and wickedness in another. Indeed, sinning usually involves a measure of both weakness and wickedness on the part of the sinner. One determining factor is how the sinner views what he has done and what he intends to do about it. Does he show a repentant spirit? Elders need discernment to perceive this. How can they get that discernment? The apostle Paul promised Timothy: "Give constant thought to what I am saying; the Lord will really give you discernment in all things." (2 Timothy 2:7) If elders humbly give "constant thought" to the inspired words of Paul and the other Bible writers, they will get the discernment needed to view properly those who sin in the congregation. Then, their decisions will reflect Jehovah's thinking, not their own.—Proverbs 11:2; Matthew 18:18.

How is this done? One way is to examine how the Bible describes wicked people and see whether the description applies to the individual being dealt with.

Taking Responsibility and Repenting

The first humans who chose a course of wickedness were Adam and Eve. Despite being perfect and having full knowledge of Jehovah's law, they rebelled against divine sovereignty. When Jehovah confronted them with what they had done, their reactions were worthy of note-Adam blamed Eve, and Eve blamed the serpent! (Genesis 3:12, 13) Compare this with the deep humility of David . When faced with his grave sins, he accepted responsibility and begged for forgiveness, saying: "I have sinned against Jehovah."-2 Samuel 12:13; Psalm 51:4, 9, 10.

Elders do well to consider these two examples when handling cases of serious sin, especially on the part of an adult. Does the sinner-like David when he was convinced of his sin-forthrightly accept the blame and repentantly look to Jehovah for help and forgiveness, or does he seek to minimize what he has done, perhaps blaming someone else? True, the person who sins may wish to explain what led up to his acts, and there may be circumstances, either past or present, that elders may need to consider when deciding how to help him. (Compare Hosea 4:14.) But he should accept that he is the one who sinned and that he is responsible before Jehovah. Remember: "Jehovah is near to those that are broken at heart; and those who are crushed in spirit he saves."-Psalm 34:18.

Practicing What Is Bad

In the book of Psalms, there are many references to wicked people. Such scriptures can further help elders to discern whether a person is basically wicked or weak. For example, consider the inspired prayer of King David: "Do not draw me along with wicked people and with practicers of what is hurtful, those who are speaking peace with their companions but in whose hearts is what is bad." (Psalm 28:3) Notice that wicked people are mentioned in parallel with "practicers of what is hurtful." A person who sins because of fleshly weakness is likely to stop as soon as he comes to his senses. If, though, someone 'practices' what is bad so that it becomes a part of his life, this could be evidence of a wicked heart.

David mentioned another characteristic of wickedness in that verse. Like Ananias and Sapphira, the wicked person speaks good things with his mouth but has bad things in his heart. He may be a hypocrite-like the Pharisees of Jesus' day who 'outwardly indeed appeared righteous to men but inside were full of hypocrisy and lawlessness.' (Matthew 23:28; Luke 11:39) Jehovah hates hypocrisy. (Proverbs 6:16-19) If someone hypocritically tries to deny his serious sins even when speaking with the judicial committee, or grudgingly admits only what is already known by others, refusing to confess fully, this could well be evidence of a wicked heart.

Haughty Disregard for Jehovah

Other things that characterize a wicked person are outlined in Psalm 10. There we read: "In his haughtiness the wicked one hotly pursues the afflicted one; . . . he has disrespected Jehovah." (Psalm 10:2, 3) How are we to view a dedicated Christian who is haughty and disrespects Jehovah? Surely, these are wicked mental attitudes. A person who sins out of weakness will, once he realizes his sin or has it drawn to his attention, repent and strive hard to turn his life around. (2 Corinthians 7:10, 11) In contrast, if a man sins because of a fundamental disrespect for Jehovah, what will stop him from returning again and again to his sinful course? If he is haughty despite being counseled in a spirit of mildness, how can he have the humility needed to repent sincerely and truly?

Consider now David 's words a little later in the same psalm: "Why is it that the wicked one has disrespected God? He has said in his heart: 'You will not require an accounting.'" (Psalm 10:13) In the setting of the Christian congregation, the wicked man knows the difference between right and wrong, but he does not hesitate to do wrong if he thinks he can get away with it. As long as there is no fear of exposure, he gives full rein to his sinful inclinations. Unlike David , if his sins do come to light, he will scheme to avoid discipline. Such a man is highly disrespectful of Jehovah. "There is no dread of God in front of his eyes. . . . What is bad he does not reject."-Psalm 36:1, 4.

Harming Others

Usually, more than one person is affected by a sin. For example, an adulterer sins against God; he victimizes his wife and children; if his partner in sin is married, he victimizes her family; and he stains the good name of the congregation. How does he view all of that? Does he show heartfelt sorrow along with genuine repentance? Or does he manifest the spirit described in Psalm 94: "All the practicers of what is hurtful keep bragging about themselves. Your people, O Jehovah, they keep crushing, and your inheritance they keep afflicting. The widow and the alien resident they kill, and the fatherless boys they murder. And they keep saying: 'Jah does not see; and the God of Jacob does not understand it'"?-Psalm 94:4-7.

Likely, the sins handled in a congregation will not involve murder and killing. Yet the spirit manifested here-the spirit of being ready to victimize others for personal benefit-may become obvious as the elders investigate wrongdoing. This too is arrogance, the mark of a wicked man. (Proverbs 21:4) It is totally the opposite of the spirit of a true Christian, who is willing to sacrifice himself for his brother.-John 15:12, 13.

Applying Godly Principles

These few guidelines are not intended to set rules. They do, however, give an idea of some things that Jehovah views as truly wicked. Is there a refusal to accept responsibility for the wrong committed? Has the one who sinned brazenly ignored previous counsel on this very matter? Is there an entrenched practice of serious wrongdoing? Does the wrongdoer manifest a blatant disregard for Jehovah's law? Has he made calculating efforts to conceal the wrong, perhaps corrupting others at the same time? (Jude 4) Do such efforts only intensify when the wrong comes to light? Does the wrongdoer show total disregard for the harm he has done to others and to Jehovah's name? What about his attitude? After kindly Scriptural counsel is given, is he haughty or arrogant? Does he lack a heartfelt desire to avoid repeating the wrong? If the elders perceive such things, which strongly indicate a lack of repentance, they may conclude that the sins committed give evidence of wickedness rather than merely weakness of the flesh.

Even when dealing with a person who seems to have wicked inclinations, elders do not cease to exhort him to pursue righteousness. (Hebrews 3:12) Wicked individuals may repent and change. If that were not the case, why did Jehovah urge the Israelites: "Let the wicked man leave his way, and the harmful man his thoughts; and let him return to Jehovah, who will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for he will forgive in a large way"? (Isaiah 55:7) Perhaps, during a judicial hearing, the elders will perceive a marked change in his heart condition as reflected in a repentant bearing and attitude.

Even at the time of disfellowshipping an individual, the elders, as shepherds, will urge him to repent and try to make his way back into Jehovah's favor. Remember the "wicked man" in Corinth . Evidently he changed his way, and Paul later recommended his reinstatement. (2 Corinthians 2:7, 8) Consider also King Manasseh. He was very wicked indeed, but when he finally repented, Jehovah accepted his repentance.-2 Kings 21:10-16; 2 Chronicles 33:9, 13, 19.

True, there is a sin that will not be forgiven-sin against the holy spirit. (Hebrews 10:26, 27) Jehovah alone determines who has committed that sin. Humans have no authority to do so. The responsibility of the elders is to keep the congregation clean and to help to restore repentant sinners. If they do so with discernment and humility, letting their decisions reflect Jehovah's wisdom, then Jehovah will bless this aspect of their shepherding.

The Watchtower, June 1, 1992 Issue, Page 19:

15 What if we commit a serious sin? King David described those whom Jehovah favors when he said: "Who may ascend into the mountain of Jehovah, and who may rise up in his holy place? Anyone innocent in his hands and clean in heart, who has not carried My soul to sheer worthlessness, nor taken an oath deceitfully." (Psalm 24:3, 4) If for some reason we are no longer 'innocent in our hands and clean in heart,' we must act with urgency. Our everlasting life is in jeopardy.

16 Some have been tempted to hide serious sins, perhaps reasoning: 'I have confessed to Jehovah and repented. So why involve the elders?' The wrongdoer may be embarrassed or fear what the elders might do. He should, however, remember that although Jehovah alone can cleanse us of sin, He has made the elders primarily responsible for the purity of the congregation. (Psalm 51:2) They are there for healing, for "the readjustment of the holy ones." (Ephesians 4:12) Not to go to them when we need spiritual help is like not going to a doctor when we are sick.

17 Some who try to handle matters alone find that months or years later, their conscience is still severely troubling them. Even worse, others who hide a serious error fall into sin a second and even a third time. When the matter finally comes to the attention of the elders, it is a case of repeated wrongdoing. How much better to follow the counsel of James! He wrote: "Is there anyone sick among you? Let him call the older men of the congregation to him, and let them pray over him, greasing him with oil in the name of Jehovah." (James 5:14) Go to the elders while it is still a time for healing. If we wait too long, we might become hardened in a course of sin.-Ecclesiastes 3:3; Isaiah 32:1, 2.

The Watchtower, March 15, 1991 Issue, Pages 4-7:

When did the modern practice of confession begin? Religion in the Medieval West states: "A new form of penance was introduced in France in the late sixth century by Celtic monks. . . . This was auricular confession, in which the penitent confessed his sins privately to a priest, and it was an adaption of the monastic practice of spiritual counselling." According to the older monastic practice, the monks confessed their sins to one another to get spiritual help in order to overcome their weaknesses. In newer auricular confession, however, the church claimed for the priest the much greater "power or authority to forgive sins."- New Catholic Encyclopedia.

Did Jesus really give some of his followers such power? What did he say that has led some to this conclusion? "The Keys of the Kingdom"

On one occasion, Jesus Christ told the apostle Peter: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven: whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven." (Matthew 16:19, The Jerusalem Bible) What did Jesus mean by "the keys of the kingdom"? We can understand this better if we look at another occasion when Jesus used the word "key."

Jesus once told the Jewish religious leaders versed in the Mosaic Law: "Alas for you lawyers who have taken away the key of knowledge! You have not gone in yourselves, and have prevented others going in who wanted to." (Luke 11:52, JB) 'Prevented others from going in' where? Jesus tells us at Matthew 23:13: "Alas for you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You who shut up the kingdom of heaven in men's faces, neither going in yourselves nor allowing others to go in who want to." (JB) The Jewish clergy closed the door on many, as it were, by robbing them of the opportunity to be with Jesus Christ in heaven. The "key" those religious leaders had "taken away" had nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins. It was the key to divinely provided knowledge.

Similarly, "the keys of the kingdom" given to Peter do not represent power to inform heaven as to whose sins should be forgiven or retained. Rather, they represent Peter's great privilege of opening up the way to heaven by disseminating divinely provided knowledge through his ministry. He did this first for Jews and Jewish proselytes, then for Samaritans, and finally for the Gentiles.-Acts 2:1-41; 8:14 -17; 10:1-48.

"Whatever You Bind on Earth"

Later, what Jesus had told Peter was repeated to other disciples. "I tell you solemnly," said Jesus, "whatever you bind on earth shall be considered bound in heaven; whatever you loose on earth shall be considered loosed in heaven." (Matthew 18:18, JB) What authority did Christ here delegate to the disciples? The context shows that he was talking about settling problems between individual believers and keeping the congregation clean of unrepentant evildoers.- Matthew 18:15-17.

In matters involving serious violations of God's law, responsible men in the congregation would have to judge matters and decide whether a wrongdoer should be "bound" (viewed as guilty) or "loosed" (acquitted). Did this mean that heaven would follow the decisions of humans? No. As Bible scholar Robert Young indicates, any decision made by the disciples would follow heaven's decision, not precede it. He says that verse 18 should literally read: What you bind on earth "shall be that which has been bound (already)" in heaven. Really, it is unreasonable to think that any imperfect human could make decisions that would be binding upon those in the heavenly courts. It is much more reasonable to say that Christ's appointed representatives would follow his directions so as to keep his congregation clean. They would do this by making a decision based on principles already laid down in heaven. Jesus himself would guide them in doing this.- Matthew 18:20.

Is any man able to "represent Christ as the fatherly judge" to the extent of deciding the eternal future of a fellow worshiper? (New Catholic Encyclopedia) Priests who hear confessions almost invariably grant absolution, even though "there seems to be an unspoken belief [among Catholic theologians] that it is a rare person who is really sorry for his sins." (The New Encyclopædia Britannica) Indeed, when was the last time that you heard of a priest refusing to grant absolution or to acquit a wrongdoer? Likely, this is because the individual priest does not think he has the ability to judge whether a sinner is repentant or not. But if this is the case, why does he claim the power to grant absolution?

Imagine a court of law in which a compassionate judge routinely acquitted criminals, even persistent lawbreakers, because they went through a ritual of admitting their crimes and saying that they were sorry. While this might satisfy wrongdoers, such a misguided view of mercy would seriously undermine respect for justice. Could it be that confession as practiced in the Catholic Church actually hardens people in a course of sin?-Ecclesiastes 8:11 .

"Confession does not produce any inclination to try to avoid the sin in the future," says Ramona, drawing on her experience of confessing as a Catholic since she was seven years old. She adds: "Confession develops the idea that God is all-forgiving and that whatever your imperfect flesh leads you to do he will forgive. It does not develop a deep desire to do what is right."

But what about Jesus' words recorded at John 20:22, 23? There he told his disciples: "Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained." (JB) Does Jesus not here specifically give his disciples authority to forgive sins?

Taken alone, this Bible passage might seem to say that. However, when these words are considered along with the account at Matthew 18:15-18 and everything else that the Bible teaches about confession and forgiveness, what must we conclude? That at John 20:22, 23, Jesus gave his disciples authority to expel from the congregation unrepentant perpetrators of grave sins. At the same time, Christ gave his followers authority to extend mercy and forgive repentant sinners. Jesus certainly was not saying that his disciples should confess every sin to a priest.

Responsible ones in the congregation were thus authorized to decide how to deal with those committing grave sins. Such decisions would be made under the guidance of God's holy spirit and in harmony with God's directions given through Jesus Christ and the Holy Scriptures. (Compare Acts 5:1-5; 1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 11-13.) Those responsible men would thereby respond to direction from heaven, not imposing their decisions on heaven.

"Confess Your Sins to One Another"

So, then, when is it appropriate for Christians to confess sins to one another? In the case of serious sin (not every little failing), an individual should confess to responsible overseers of the congregation. Even if a sin is

not grievous but the sinner's conscience troubles him excessively, there is great value in confessing and seeking spiritual help.

In this regard the Bible writer James says: "If one of you is [spiritually] ill, he should send for the elders of the church, and they must anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord and pray over him. The prayer of faith will save the sick man and the Lord will raise him up again; and if he has committed any sins, he will be forgiven. So confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another."-James 5:14-16, JB.

In these words, there is no suggestion of a formal, ritualistic, auricular confession. Rather, when a Christian is so burdened with sin that he feels he cannot pray, he should call the appointed elders, or overseers, of the congregation, and they will pray with him. To help him recover spiritually, they will also apply the oil of God's Word.-Psalm 141:5; compare Luke 5:31, 32; Revelation 3:18.

Noteworthy is John the Baptizer's admonition to "produce fruit that befits repentance." (Matthew 3:8; compare Acts 26:20.) A truly repentant wrongdoer abandons his sinful course. Like King David of ancient Israel , the repentant sinner who confesses his error to God will receive forgiveness. David wrote: "My sin I finally confessed to you, and my error I did not cover. I said: 'I shall make confession over my transgressions to Jehovah.' And you yourself pardoned the error of my sins."-Psalm 32:5.

Penitential acts cannot earn such forgiveness. Only God can grant it. He takes the requirements of perfect justice into account, but his forgiveness expresses his love for mankind. His forgiveness is also a manifestation of undeserved kindness founded on the ransom sacrifice of Jesus Christ and is extended solely to repentant sinners who have turned away from what is bad in God's sight. (Psalm 51:7; Isaiah 1:18; John 3:16; Romans 3:23-26) Only those forgiven by Jehovah God will gain eternal life. And to receive such forgiveness, we must make confession in God's way, not man's.

Reasoning from the Scriptures (Published in 1989), Pages 80-84:

Confession

Definition: A declaration or an acknowledgment, either publicly or in private, (1) of what a person believes or (2) of his sins.

Is the rite of reconciliation, including auricular confession (personal confession into the ear of a priest), as taught by the Catholic Church Scriptural?

The manner in which the priest is addressed

The traditional formula, still often used, is: "Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It has been [length of time] since my last Confession."-U.S. Catholic magazine, October 1982, p. 6.

Matt. 23:1, 9, JB: "Jesus said, . . . 'You must call no one on earth your father, since you have only one Father, and he is in heaven.'"

Sins that can be forgiven

"The Church has always taught that every sin, no matter how serious, can be forgiven."-The Catholic Encyclopedia (bearing the nihil obstat and the imprimatur), R. C. Broderick (Nashville, Tenn.; 1976), p. 554.

Heb. 10:26, JB: "If, after we have been given knowledge of the truth, we should deliberately commit any sins, then there is no longer any sacrifice for them."

Mark 3:29 , JB: "Let anyone blaspheme against the Holy Spirit and he will never have forgiveness: he is guilty of an eternal sin."

How penance is to be shown

Frequently the confessor directs that the penitent say a specified number of "Our Fathers" and "Hail Marys."

Matt. 6:7, JB: "In your prayers do not babble [that is, utter in a meaninglessly repetitious manner] as the pagans do, for they think that by using many words they will make themselves heard."

Matt. 6:9-12, JB: "You should pray like this: 'Our Father in heaven, . . . forgive us our debts.'" (Nowhere in the Bible are we commanded to pray to or through Mary. See Philippians 4:6, also pages 258, 259, under "Mary.")

Rom. 12:9, JB: "Do not let your love be a pretence, but sincerely prefer good to evil."

Did not Jesus authorize his apostles to forgive sins?

John 20:21-23, JB: "'As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' After saying this he breathed on them and said: 'Receive the Holy Spirit. For those whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; for those whose sins you retain, they are retained.'"

How did the apostles understand and apply this? There is no record in the Bible of a single instance in which an apostle listened to a private confession and then pronounced absolution. However, the requirements for being forgiven by God are set out in the Bible. The apostles, under the direction of holy spirit, could discern whether individuals were meeting such requirements and could on this basis declare that God had either forgiven them or not forgiven them. For examples, see Acts 5:1-11, also 1 Corinthians 5:1-5 and 2 Corinthians 2:6-8.

See also the main heading "Apostolic Succession."

Viewpoints of scholars as to the origin of auricular confession differ

The Catholic Encyclopedia, by R. C. Broderick, states: "Since the fourth century auricular confession has been the accepted method."-P. 58.

The New Catholic Encyclopedia says: "Many contemporary historians, both Catholic and Protestant, trace the origins of private penance as a normal discipline to the churches of Ireland, Wales, and Britain, where the Sacraments, including Penance, were administered usually by the abbot of a monastery and his priest-monks. With the monastic practice of confession and public and private spiritual direction as the model, repeated confession and confession of devotion seem to have been introduced for the laity. . . . However, it was not until the 11th century that secret sins were absolved at the time of confession and before the fulfillment of penance."-(1967), Vol. XI, p. 75.

His torian A. H. Sayce reports: "The ritual texts show that both public and private confession was practised in Babylonia . Indeed, private confession seems to have been the older and more usual method."-The Religions of Ancient Egypt and Babylonia (Edinburgh , 1902), p. 497.

What are the beliefs of Jehovah's Witnesses as to confession?

Confessing one's faith by public declaration

Rom. 10:9, 10: "If you publicly declare that 'word in your own mouth,' that Jesus is Lord, and exercise faith in your heart that God raised him up from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one exercises faith for righteousness, but with the mouth one makes public declaration for salvation."

Matt. 10:32, 33: "Everyone, then, that confesses union with me [Jesus Christ] before men, I will also confess union with him before my Father who is in the heavens; but whoever disowns me before men, I will also disown him before my Father who is in the heavens."

When a person sins against God

Matt. 6:6-12: "When you pray, go into your private room and, after shutting your door, pray to your Father who is in secret . . . 'Our Father in the heavens, let your name be sanctified . . . and forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.'"

Ps. 32:5: "My sin I finally confessed to you [God], and my error I did not cover. I said: 'I shall make confession over my transgressions to Jehovah.' And you yourself pardoned the error of my sins."

1 John 2:1: "If anyone does commit a sin, we have a helper with the Father, Jesus Christ, a righteous one."

When an individual wrongs his fellowman or when he has been wronged

Matt. 5:23, 24: "If, then, you are bringing your gift to the altar and you there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar, and go away; first make your peace with your brother, and then, when you have come back, offer up your gift."

Matt. 18:15: "If your brother commits a sin, go lay bare his fault between you and him alone."

Luke 17:3: "If your brother commits a sin give him a rebuke, and if he repents forgive him."

Eph. 4:32: "Become kind to one another, tenderly compassionate, freely forgiving one another just as God also by Christ freely forgave you."

When someone becomes involved in serious wrongdoing and wants spiritual help

Jas. 5:14-16: "Is there anyone [spiritually] sick among you? Let him call all the older men of the congregation to him, and let them pray over him, greasing him with oil in the name of Jehovah. And the prayer of faith will make the indisposed one well, and Jehovah will raise him up. Also, if he has committed sins, it will be forgiven him [by God]. Therefore openly confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may get healed."

Prov. 28:13: "He that is covering over his transgressions will not succeed, but he that is confessing and leaving them will be shown mercy."

What if persons who commit sins do not seek help?

Gal. 6:1: "Brothers, even though a man takes some false step before he is aware of it, you who have spiritual qualifications try to readjust such a man in a spirit of mildness, as you each keep an eye on yourself, for fear you also may be tempted."

1 Tim. 5:20: "Reprove before all onlookers [that is, those who personally know about the matter] persons who practice sin, that the rest also may have fear."

1 Cor. 5:11-13: "Quit mixing in company with anyone called a brother that is a fornicator or a greedy person or an idolater or a reviler or a drunkard or an extortioner, not even eating with such a man. . . . 'Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.'"

Insight on the Scriptures, Volume 2 (Published in 1988), Pages 773-774:

Confession of wrongdoing. The repentant person, then, humbles himself and seeks God's face (2Ch 7:13 , 14; 33:10-13; Jas 4:6-10), supplicating his forgiveness. (Mt 6:12) He is not like the self-righteous Pharisee of Jesus' illustration but is like the tax collector whom Jesus portrayed as beating his breast and saying, "O God, be gracious to me a sinner." (Lu 18:9-14) The apostle John states: "If we make the statement: 'We have no sin,' we are misleading ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and righteous so as to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." (1Jo 1:8, 9) "He that is covering over

his transgressions will not succeed, but he that is confessing and leaving them will be shown mercy."-Pr 28:13; compare Ps 32:3-5; Jos 7:19-26; 1Ti 5:24 .

Daniel's prayer at Daniel 9:15-19 is a model of sincere confession, expressing prime concern for Jehovah's name and basing its appeal "not according to our righteous acts . . . but according to your many mercies." Compare, also, the humble expression of the prodigal son. (Lu 15:17-21) Sincerely repentant ones 'raise their heart along with their palms to God,' confessing their transgression and seeking forgiveness.-La 3:40 -42. Confessing sins to one another. The disciple James counsels: "Openly confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may get healed." (Jas 5:16) Such confession is not because any human serves as "helper ["advocate," RS]" for man with God, since Christ alone fills that role by virtue of his propitiatory sacrifice. (1Jo 2:1, 2) Humans, of themselves, cannot actually right the wrong toward God, on their own behalf or on behalf of others, being unable to provide the needed atonement. (Ps 49:7, 8) However, Christians can help one another, and their prayers on behalf of their brothers, while not having an effect on God's application of justice (since Christ's ransom alone serves to bring remission of sins), do count with God in petitioning his giving needed help and strength to the one who has sinned and is seeking aid.-See PRAYER (The Answering of Prayers).

The Watchtower, April 1, 1986 Issue, Page 26:

Remember, too, that sin's enjoyment is only "temporary." (Hebrews 11:25) Sooner or later "your sin will catch up with you," and there will be bitter consequences to face. (Numbers 32:23) Ask yourself: 'Do I really want to become hardened by sin? While this may be pleasurable now, how will this affect me in the long run?' What, though, if one presently finds himself trapped in a course of wrongdoing? Do not conclude that one can "atone" for sin by a spurt of Christian activity. "The sacrifices to God are a broken spirit," said repentant King David . (Psalm 51:17) The Bible's advice to spiritually sick ones is: Go to the elders! (James 5:14, 15) These mature men will do all they can to help an ailing one back to spiritual health. It is as the Bible states: "He that is covering over his transgressions will not succeed, but he that is confessing and leaving them will be shown mercy." (Proverbs 28:13) Said one man after finally confessing his sin to the elders: "It was as if an enormous weight had been taken off my shoulders."-Compare Psalm 32:1-5.

As this world gets more and more wicked, it will become an even greater challenge for a Christian to keep his integrity. Remember, though: "Although a sinner may be doing bad a hundred times and continuing a long time as he pleases, . . . it will turn out well with those fearing the true God." (Ecclesiastes 8:12) So fear Jehovah God! He will provide you with escape from the hardening effects of sin.

The Watchtower, December 1, 1985 Issue, Pages 3-7:

The Churches and Sin

"The sin of this century is the loss of all sense of sin." Pope Pius XII made that forceful statement as early as 1946. Obviously, the situation has worsened since then. In his recent document on sin and confession, called "Reconciliation and Penance," Pope John Paul II quoted those words of his predecessor and deplored what he called the eclipse of the concept of sin in today's secularized society.

The pope also reminded Catholic priests, and Catholics in general, that collective confession and absolution, as practiced in many Catholic churches today, is not good enough. He stated that individual confession is "the only ordinary and normal way" of observing the sacrament of penance. In Catholic dogma penance is associated with good works in reconciling the sinner with God.

Most Protestant churches deny the need for private confession to a priest. They hold that confession to God is sufficient for the forgiveness of sins, but some favor general confession and absolution at the "Communion service." Many Protestants believe that faith alone is necessary to be justified before God.

Such conflicting doctrines within the so-called Christian churches on the subject of confession, penance, and justification, or how to find a right standing before God, leave many people perplexed. They have a vague feeling that they should be doing something to get right with God, but they do not know how to go about it. The following article will explain why we need to be put right with God, and it will examine the Catholic and Protestant viewpoints on "justification." Two other articles will explain what the Bible teaches on the subject of obtaining a righteous standing before God, and how this affects you.

Righteousness Before God-How?

"GOD 'e say 'im alrite." Such is apparently the way "justification" has been presented in a recent New Guinea Pidgin version of the "New Testament." As quaint as this may seem, it does express the basic idea behind the word translated in many English-language Bibles as "justification," or "declaration of righteousness," as expressed in Romans 5:16.

On the other hand, some people say: 'I lead a decent life. I do good to others when I can. I am prepared to meet my Maker.' They apparently understand justification to mean self-justification. According to the Bible, the doctrine of "justification" relates to the way God regards us and the way he deals with us. Jehovah is "the Creator." (Isaiah 40:28) He is "the Judge of all the earth." (Genesis 18:25) Nothing, therefore, could be more important than the way he considers us.

Why We Need to Be Put Right With God

The Bible says of Jehovah: "The Rock, perfect is his activity, for all his ways are justice. A God of faithfulness, with whom there is no injustice; righteous and upright is he." (Deuteronomy 32:4) He is the embodiment of righteousness. As the Creator and Life-Giver, he has the right to set the standard, or norm, for determining what is right and what is wrong. That which is in conformity with God's standard is righteous.

Thus, God sets the mark that his intelligent creatures must reach if they wish to live in harmony with their Creator. Missing that mark, or standard, is what the original languages of the Bible call sin. Sin is, therefore, unrighteousness. It is a failure to conform to God's definition of right and wrong. Consequently, sin is also a form of disorder, a form of lawlessness.-1 John 5:17; 3:4.

Jehovah "is a God, not of disorder, but of peace." (1 Corinthians 14:33) Originally, all his creatures in heaven and on earth were perfect. They were endowed with free will. (2 Corinthians 3:17) They enjoyed "the glorious freedom of the children of God." (Romans 8:21) As long as his righteous standards were respected, peace and order prevailed throughout the universe. Disorder intruded into the universe when, first in heaven, later on earth, some creatures became lawless before God, rejecting his right to rule over them. They deviated from God's standard of right and wrong. They missed the mark and thus made sinners of themselves.

This was the case with our first parents, Adam and Eve. (Genesis 3:1-6) "That is why . . . sin entered into the world and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men because they had all sinned." (Romans 5:12) Ever since their rebellion, sin has "ruled as king with death," because all Adam's descendants "have sinned and fall short" of God's righteous standard. (Romans 5:21 ; 3:23) Hence our need to be put right with God. The Catholic View of "Justification"

This need for reconciliation with God is recognized by all the churches that claim to be Christian. However, the understanding of the way in which it is attained and of the Christian's standing before God differs in Catholic and Protestant doctrine.

As to Catholic dogma, The Catholic Encyclopedia states: "Justification denotes that change or transformation in the soul by which man is transferred from the state of original sin, in which as a child of Adam he was born, to that of grace and Divine sonship through Jesus Christ, the second Adam." A Catholic Dictionary further explains: "We confine ourselves here to the process by which adults are elevated from a state of death and sin to the favour and friendship of God; for with regard to infants the Church teaches that they are justified in baptism without any act of their own."

Briefly put, the Catholic Church teaches that "justification" is an act of God whereby a person who is baptized in the Catholic faith is really made righteous and sanctified by the gift of divine "grace." It also claims that such justification can be (1) increased by personal merit, or good works; (2) lost by mortal sin and by unbelief; (3) regained by the sacrament of penance. Within this arrangement, the justified Catholic must confess his sins to a priest and receive absolution. Any "temporal punishment" still due after absolution can be atoned for by good works or remitted by means of an "indulgence."

The Protestant View

The abusive sale of indulgences in the early 16th century sparked the Protestant Reformation. Catholic monk Martin Luther attacked this practice in the 95 theses he posted on the door of the castle church in Wittenberg, Germany , in 1517. But, in reality, Luther's disagreement with official Catholic dogma went deeper than that. It embraced the church's entire doctrine of justification. Confirming this, A Catholic Dictionary states: "The difference of belief on the way by which sinners are justified before God formed the main subject of contention between Catholics and Protestants at the time of the Reformation. 'If this doctrine' (i.e. the doctrine of justification by faith alone) 'falls,' says Luther in his Table Talk, 'it is all over with us.'" What, exactly, did Luther mean by 'justification by faith alone'? As a Catholic, Luther had learned that man's justification involves baptism, personal merit, and good works, as well as the sacrament of penance administered by a priest, who hears confession, grants absolution, and imposes compensatory works that can involve self-punishment.

In his efforts to find peace with God, Luther had expended all the resources of Roman dogma on justification, including fasting, prayers, and self-punishment, but to no avail. Unappeased, he read and reread the Psalms and Paul's letters, finally finding peace of mind by concluding that God justifies men, not because of their merits, good works, or penance, but solely because of their faith. He became so enthused by this thought of "justification by faith alone" that he added the word "alone" after the word "faith" in his German translation of Romans 3:28!

Most of the Protestant churches basically adopted Luther's view of "justification by grace through faith." In fact, this had already been expressed by the French pre-Reformer Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples. Summing up the difference between Catholic and Protestant views on justification, A Catholic Dictionary states: "Catholics regard justification as an act by which a man is really made just; Protestants, as one in which he is merely declared and reputed just, the merits of another-viz. Christ-being made over to his account."

Neither Catholic nor Protestant "Justification"

Catholic dogma goes beyond what the Bible teaches when it claims that "a man is really made just," or righteous, by the gift of divine grace bestowed at baptism. It is not baptism that washes away original sin,

but it is Christ's shed blood. (Romans 5:8, 9) There is a big difference between really being made righteous by God and being counted, or considered, as being righteous. (Romans 4:7, 8) Any honest Catholic, struggling in his fight against sin, knows that he has not really been made righteous. (Romans 7:14-19) If he were really righteous, he would have no sins to confess to a priest.

Furthermore, if Catholic dogma followed the Bible, the sin-conscious Catholic would confess his sins to God, asking forgiveness through Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:9-2:2) The intercession of a human priest at any stage of "justification" has no foundation in the Bible, no more than the accumulation of merits upon which the doctrine of indulgences is based.-Hebrews 7:26-28.

The Protestant concept of justification, as meaning a Christian's being declared righteous on the merits of Christ's sacrifice, is without a doubt nearer to what the Bible teaches. However, some Protestant churches teach "justification by faith alone," which, as we will later see, overlooks specific reasonings presented by the apostle Paul and by James. Those churches' spiritually smug attitude is summed up by the phrase "once saved, always saved." Some Protestants believe that it is sufficient to believe in Jesus to be saved and, therefore, that justification precedes baptism.

Further, certain Protestant churches, while teaching justification by faith, follow the French reformer John Calvin and teach personal predestination, thus denying the Biblical doctrine of free will. (Deuteronomy 30:19, 20) It can, therefore, be stated that neither the Catholic nor the Protestant concepts of justification are totally in harmony with the Bible.

What Does the Bible Teach?

Yet the Bible definitely teaches the doctrine of "justification," or the way in which a human can be granted a righteous standing before God. We have earlier seen why we need to be put right with God, since we are all born, not as God's children, but as "children of wrath." (Ephesians 2:1-3) Whether God's wrath remains upon us or not depends upon our accepting or refusing his merciful provision for reconciliation with him, the holy, righteous God. (John 3:36) That loving provision is "the ransom paid by Christ Jesus."-Romans 3:23, 24. The apostle Paul showed that Christ's ransom sacrifice opens up two hopes, one "upon the earth" and the other "in the heavens." He wrote: "God saw good for all fullness to dwell in him [Christ], and through him to reconcile again to himself all other things by making peace through the blood he shed on the torture stake, no matter whether they are the things upon the earth or the things in the heavens."-Colossians 1:19, 20. To share in either of these two hopes, it is necessary to have a righteous standing before God, and this involves much more than merely "believing in Jesus." Just what is involved for Christians who have the heavenly hope and for those whose hope is to live forever in a paradise on earth will be considered in the following two articles. Please read on, and do not hesitate to ask the witness of Jehovah who supplied you with this magazine to discuss these articles with you, Bible in hand.

The Watchtower, November 15, 1985 Issue, Pages 18-22:

Do Not Share in the Sins of Others

"I have not sat with men of untruth; and with those who hide what they are I do not come in."-PSALM 26:4. NINETEEN centuries ago, the disciple Jude had intended to write fellow believers about 'the salvation they held in common.' But he found it necessary to urge them to "put up a hard fight for the faith that was once for all time delivered to the holy ones." Why? Because certain "ungodly men" had slipped into the congregation and were "turning the undeserved kindness of our God into an excuse for loose conduct."-Jude 3, 4.

2 How refreshing to discuss salvation held in common! Meditating on that message brings great satisfaction, and we rejoice when anticipating all the blessings of that salvation. Nevertheless, there are times when, rather than speaking about salvation, we are faced with the need to consider other serious matters. If not corrected, these can tear down our faith and cause us to lose out in the race for life. Even as Jude's warning against wrong conduct was strong and forceful, so Christians today must at times prayerfully consider Scriptural counsel that is direct, very much to the point.

Our Own Sins

3 The psalmist David said: "With error I was brought forth with birth pains, and in sin my mother conceived me." (Psalm 51:5) All of us have been born as sinners. (Romans 5:12) The apostle John wrote: "If we make the statement: 'We have no sin,' we are misleading ourselves and the truth is not in us." (1 John 1:8) As sinners, there are times when we need discipline so as to correct our course. Such discipline comes from Jehovah through his Word, the Bible, and his organization. His discipline corrects us and helps us to walk in uprightness before him. As the apostle Paul observed: "True, no discipline seems for the present to be joyous, but grievous; yet afterward to those who have been trained by it it yields peaceable fruit, na mel y, righteousness." (Hebrews 12:11) In view of the peaceable fruit of such discipline, we surely should receive it with gratitude.

4 Discipline from Jehovah may be given when we are just starting on a course that could lead to greater wrongdoing. (Galatians 6:1) At other times, the discipline may come after we have more fully entered into a wrong course. Such discipline may have to be severe, as when the apostle Paul strongly urged the

Corinthians to take action against a fornicator in the congregation. (1 Corinthians 5:1-5) In either case, the discipline is given so that the wrongdoer might repent, turn around, and steer a steady course away from the sinful desires leading into serious wrongdoing. (Compare Acts 3:19 .) Servants of Jehovah are grateful for such discipline, even as the rebuked individual in ancient Corinth benefited and apparently was restored to loving association with the congregation.-2 Corinthians 2:5-8.

5 The vast majority of those dedicated to Jehovah are very much aware of the need to walk in an upright manner before God. If they should become involved in serious sin, they quickly turn away from the bad course, go to the appointed elders, and give evidence of genuine repentance. (James 5:13-16) The fact that relatively few of Jehovah's Witnesses are disfellowshipped each year is evidence that they hate what is bad and desire to do what is good.-Psalm 34:14; 45:7.

The Sins of Others

6 Yet some who apparently love what is right seem to have allowed their hearts to deceive them, for they do not appear to hate what is bad. (Psalm 97:10; Amos 5:15) As a result, they get involved in doing sinful things and do not maintain the fight to do what is right. At times, they may go even further, seeking to involve others in their sinful course. How important that we reject such suggestions!-Compare Proverbs 1:10 -15.

7 Sometimes those who apparently do not hate what is bad talk so smoothly that a yearning to do what is wrong may develop in the hearts of those listening to them. The encouragement may be to engage in immorality or in some action bordering on conduct disapproved by God. Or a person may be urged to become involved in a situation that is potentially dangerous in a spiritual way. Those thus trying to persuade others may claim that Jehovah is a loving God who will be merciful when we sin. Such treachery of the heart can cause lasting damage. (Jeremiah 17:9; Jude 4) Surely, we should 'hold back our foot from their roadway'!- Proverbs 1:15 .

Sharing in the Sins of Others

8 But suppose we realize that a suggested course of action is wrong? Does our rejecting it necessarily free us of further responsibility in the matter? If we know that those suggesting wrongdoing are engaging in it, what should we do?

9 Some who have knowledge of wrongdoing by others may be inclined to say nothing about it to those having the prime responsibility to keep the congregation clean. Why? Perhaps they do not want to be viewed as informers. Or, because of a false sense of loyalty, they may keep the matter quiet or may speak only to those who promise to keep it secret. This is very serious. Why? Because it can actually result in sharing in the sins of others.

10 The apostle John showed that it is possible to share in another person's sin. He wrote: "Everyone that pushes ahead and does not remain in the teaching of the Christ does not have God. . . . If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, never receive him into your homes or say a greeting to him. For he that says a greeting to him is a sharer in his wicked works." (2 John 9-11) An apostate from "the teaching of the Christ" would not be a worthy associate, and by not even greeting him, the loyal Christian would avoid being a sharer in his wickedness.

11 Since that is the case with an apostate, surely we would not want to become sharers in the wickedness of others whose immoral acts come to our attention. What, then, if we know that a member of the congregation has become a thief or a drunkard? If we fail to encourage that individual to seek Jehovah's forgiveness and confess his sin to the elders, are we entirely blameless? No, for we have a serious responsibility. Cleanness and Protection Vital

12 We must individually show concern for the spiritual cleanness of the congregation. How well this was emphasized when Jewish exiles were about to leave Babylon in the sixth century B.C.E.! The God-given command was: "Turn away, turn away, get out of there, touch nothing unclean; get out from the midst of [Babylon], keep yourselves clean, you who are carrying the utensils of Jehovah."-Isaiah 52:11.

13 We must also be concerned about protecting Jehovah's people from those who would seek to entice them into wrongdoing. The "ungodly men" of Jude's day sought to 'turn the undeserved kindness of God into an excuse for loose conduct,' but that loyal disciple acted to warn fellow believers and thus protect them. He reminded them of warning examples provided by unfaithful Israelites, the disobedient angels, and others. Read his divinely inspired letter, and you will see that loyal Christians cannot sit idly by when the cleanness of the congregation is threatened or God's people need protection from immoral persons having unclean motives.

14 Yet, suppose we have encouraged a wrongdoer to seek God's forgiveness and confess to the elders, but he keeps putting this off or sees no need to take these steps. Can we just drop the matter? Some might reason that they do not want to become involved. They may not want to risk losing the friendship of the erring one. And they may not want to be thought of as persons who betray a confidence by telling the elders. But this is faulty reasoning. The psalmist David said: "I have not sat with men of untruth; and with those who hide what they are I do not come in." (Psalm 26:4) Surely, then, we would not want to become accomplices of "those who hide what they are."

15 Therefore, after we have given the erring individual a reasonable amount of time to approach the elders about his wrongdoing, it is our responsibility before Jehovah not to be a sharer in his sin. We need to inform the responsible overseers that the person has revealed serious wrongdoing that merits their investigation. This would be in harmony with Leviticus 5:1, which says: "Now in case a soul sins in that he has heard public cursing and he is a witness or he has seen it or has come to know of it, if he does not report it, then he must answer for his error." Of course, we must avoid acting hastily on mere supposition of wrongdoing.

16 In today's world, covering over the wrongdoing of others is a general practice. Many are as mute as a stone wall when it comes to revealing the wrongdoing of others to those who should know about such actions. It requires strength of Christian personality to inform appointed elders of the serious sin of a fellow believer. But if we are to have Jehovah's favor, we must not let personal friendship blind us to the wrongdoing of another individual. Our relationship with God is of far greater importance than loyalty to a friend who is guilty of serious wrongdoing and refuses to reveal the matter to the appointed elders.

A Problem for All to Consider

17 The problem of sharing in the sins of others sometimes exists among certain youths in our midst. They may remain silent and refuse to tell those who should be informed when others do things that could detrimentally affect the congregation and could result in Jehovah's disfavor. Covering over the wrongdoing of others is quite common in the worldly school systems. But when this viewpoint spreads to the congregation, many problems may result. There have even been reports of young ones banding together to engage in wrong conduct while swearing one another to secrecy so that elders and parents will not learn about such activity. Yielding to pressure from peers and a desire to be accepted by the group has caused much heartache for these youths, their parents, and others in the congregation when the wrongdoing has been discovered. We must remember that there is nothing hidden that will not be revealed, and one of our primary responsibilities before Jehovah is to help to keep his organization clean.-Luke 8:17.

18 All servants of Jehovah should be very careful not to share in the sins of others. Some parents try to justify the wrong conduct of their children, endeavoring to shelter them. But Christian parents should not adopt the attitude that everyone is against their children when these younger ones do wrong. Instead, godly parents should help their erring offspring to receive, accept, and benefit from any needed discipline outlined in God's Word.

19 Christian married couples also need to be careful that they do not violate God's laws by covering over each other's serious sins. They should remember the case of Ananias and Sapphira, who conspired but unsuccessfully sought to cover over serious sin. (Acts 5:1-11) Elders must also be alert not to protect one another or ministerial servants if one of them has committed a serious sin that could result in disfellowshipping. They should follow the principle outlined by Paul, who wrote: "Never lay your hands hastily upon any man; neither be a sharer in the sins of others; preserve yourself chaste."-1 Timothy 5:22.

The Wisdom of Maintaining Blamelessness

20 Servants of Jehovah should neither share in nor imitate the bad ways of this world. In writing to Gaius, the apostle John said: "Beloved one, be an imitator, not of what is bad, but of what is good. He that does good originates with God. He that does bad has not seen God." (3 John 11) How good it is to be guided by the sure Word of God and thus do what is good! Rather than covering over or sharing in the gross sins of others, therefore, it should be our resolve to shine as illuminators, being blameless and innocent. (Philippians 2:14, 15) Each servant of God is responsible for keeping the congregation clean, while remaining unblemished personally. (2 Peter 3:14) But what if you are troubled about the propriety of what someone has done? You should feel free to speak with the elders and get direction as to the right course to follow.

21 Our love for Jehovah's organization should imitate the love of Jesus Christ for his spiritual bride, the congregation. He "loved the congregation and delivered up himself for it, that he might sanctify it, cleansing it with the bath of water by means of the word, that he might present the congregation to himself in its splendor, not having a spot or a wrinkle or any of such things, but that it should be holy and without blemish." (Ephesians 5:25-27) Similarly, our love for Jehovah's organization should move us to do what we can to keep it clean. Never may we do anything to dishonor God or his organization or condone the wrongdoing of others in the congregation. Rather, let us encourage wrongdoers to correct their conduct and seek the help of the elders. If they fail to do this within a reasonable amount of time, let us shoulder our responsibility to inform the appointed overseers. In this way, we will avoid becoming sharers in the sins of others and bearing some responsibility for their wrong conduct.

22 The salvation we hold in common is a treasure beyond compare. To attain it we must continue to walk before Jehovah in an upright way. Therefore, let us help one another to do so, never sharing in the sins of others. Jehovah has lovingly provided an organizational arrangement to assist us in these efforts, and in this regard appointed elders play an important role.

16 Therefore openly confess your sins to one another and pray for one another, that you may get healed. A righteous man's supplication, when it is at work, has much force.

16 Therefore openly confess your sins to one another and pray for one another

How encouraging toward 'openly confessing sins to one another' if the sincerely repentant wrong-doer knows that those to whom he confesses are primarily interested in helping him 'get healed' of his spiritual sickness! However, if such a repentant one felt that the elders would automatically deal with him as one meriting a reprimand before the whole congregation as a 'practicer of sin,' the effect would be quite different. Such a feeling could create a barrier between the congregational shepherds and those sorely needing their help to overcome a drift into continued wrongdoing. On the other hand, where confidence existed that the elders would take into account one's sincerity in wanting to turn away from the wrong course or attitude, being desirous of never going back to it, this would surely be an encouragement to call upon the older men for assistance, and to respond to their help as would an ailing sheep to that of its conscientious shepherd.- Contrast Psalm 23:1-5 with Ezekiel 34:4.

The tense of the Greek verbs used here has a continuative sense, as saying, 'Make it a practice to confess openly your sins to one another.' Thus, Phillips' The New Testament in Modern English reads: "You should get into the habit of admitting your sins to each other."

James has previously dealt with matters that exemplify the family-like interest and warm concern that should exist within the Christian congregation as a brotherhood. With such a spiritual atmosphere, there should indeed be a confidence among its members that contributes to freeness of expression, and that confidence could be especially notable when it came to acknowledging one's faults and wrong acts. Christians are shown in Scripture that they can and should have freeness of speech in going to God with their petitions and problems, for they have a loving Father and a compassionate, understanding Helper with the Father, God's Son. (Heb. 2:17, 18; 4:14-16; 1 John 2:1, 2; 3:19-21; 4:17-19) What is true of the heavenly courts should be reflected in the earthly realm of God's servants.

This confessing is not like a "confessional" arrangement where one is viewed as obligated to appear and confess all sins in order to obtain absolution from guilt in the eyes of God. Although James had previously made specific mention of the congregation elders with regard to sick ones needing aid, he here says to "confess your sins to one another," not limiting the matter to certain ones within the congregation. While this is so, it is reasonable that the one confessing his sins would seek a person who could be of real help to him in a spiritual way. Along with the desire to unburden himself, he doubtless desires the counsel and prayer of another. Galatians 6:1, 2 speaks of the readjusting of one who takes a false step and shows that it is those "who have spiritual qualifications" who are in a position to do this. Elders should have such qualifications, and others in the congregation may also have these. A woman, for example, may seek the help of a Christian sister, possibly someone older than she is, as is indicated by Paul's counsel at Titus 2:3-5. Thus the source of the help is not limited to a certain few; the important thing is that the person have "spiritual qualifications." James shows that the object and result of this humble seeking for help should be a brotherly (or a sisterly) interest manifested in prayer to Jehovah on behalf of the one confessing the fault.

The expression "to one another" is most appropriate since all must honestly recognize their own sinful nature, thereby eliminating any basis for pride or superiority in responding to the needs of the erring one. (Compare Luke 18:9-14; 1 John 1:8-10.) Rather than superiority, there obviously should be a sense of mutual compassion, all having their own particular faults and weaknesses. The one extending help now should realize that he may someday need help himself. Along with calling for humility, such open confessing of faults can also serve as a restraint toward sinning. It leads away from a secretive course of life that deprives one of the balancing effect that the counsel of others can provide.

that you may get healed

One who has been spiritually sick or downhearted because of some sin may call for the healing help of another brother's prayer. It may be that he has let the sin become a barrier to his freeness of speech in approaching God in prayer. (Compare Lamentations 3:44.) He may, along with his bad spiritual state, be also physically sick. In fact, the sickness may be partly due to his spiritual lack. The prayer of the brother for him may help him not only in a spiritual sense, but also in a physical way.

The Watchtower, November 15, 1977 Issue, Pages 693-698:

Genuine Repentance-How Is It Identified?

"A heart broken and crushed, O God, you will not despise."-Ps. 51:17.

ELDERS are not 'father confessors' who have been authorized to forgive all the sins that members of the congregation may commit. It is Jehovah God who forgives the sins of repentant ones, doing so on the basis of his Son's atoning sacrifice. Therefore, a person's being forgiven by Jehovah is not dependent upon his confessing his sins to the elders. (1 John 1:8, 9; 2:1, 2) However, by serious transgression, a person can also sin against the congregation. This is the case because gross wrongdoing can bring much reproach and trouble upon the congregation with which the wayward one is associated. Hence, elders representing the

congregation should make sure that the individual is genuinely repentant before extending forgiveness to him for the bad name that he has given to the congregation.

2 That the congregation can forgive or withhold forgiveness in certain cases is evident from what the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians about accepting a repentant disfellowshipped man back into their midst. He wrote: "You should kindly forgive and comfort him." (2 Cor. 2:7) The apostle recommended forgiving this man because the 'rebuke given to him by the majority' had served its purpose in bringing him to repentance. (2 Cor. 2:6) Because the man had sincerely repented and straightened out his life to conform to Jehovah's righteous requirements, it was right for the congregation to receive him back. He had sought Jehovah's forgiveness for his sin and now the congregation also forgave him, not in the sense of granting "absolution" for his sin, but in forgiving him for the trouble, reproach and sorrow that his wrongdoing had brought upon the congregation.

3 In certain cases a person's record of sin, when brought to light, may be very shameful. For a period of months or even years he may have conducted himself in a way that would be considered sinful even in the world. Later, he may come to the elders, stating that he recently stopped his wrongdoing and prayed to God for forgiveness. He may feel that he has reprovved himself. Or, upon being confronted with evidence of his shameful conduct, he may tell the elders that he reprovved himself and, therefore, did not consider it necessary to approach them about the matter. What should the elders do? They should determine what kind of spiritual help the individual needs and whether he is indeed truly repentant. This may require more than one discussion with him in order to ascertain his true feelings, motivations and needs. The truly repentant one will welcome and humbly accept such loving help from the elders.

WORLDLY SADNESS OR GENUINE REPENTANCE-WHICH?

4 A wrongdoer should, of course, have feelings of sadness, remorse and regret as regards his sinful course. Depending upon the emotional makeup of the individual, these feelings may or may not be accompanied by tears. However, elders should keep in mind that not all sadness, remorse or regret is necessarily proof of genuine repentance. The Christian apostle Paul wrote: "Sadness in a godly way makes for repentance to salvation that is not to be regretted; but the sadness of the world produces death." (2 Cor. 7:10) Hence, elders properly seek insight as to what motivates the wrongdoer's sadness.

5 Worldly sadness may stem simply from a sense of personal failure and accompanying disappointment, or from concern over the loss of esteem or of certain benefits, or from the prospect of undergoing discipline or shame. This is a sadness over the undesirable and hurtful results of the wrongdoing, or over the fact that the wrongdoing came to light. Though normal in themselves, if these feelings are the sole reasons for sadness, then the individual does not truly regret having committed the sin but is distressed about having been exposed. He is not really concerned about the reproach that his transgression has brought upon God.

6 This is well illustrated in the case of Esau. For one meal he sold his birthright to Jacob. Years later, when Jacob received the blessing that was due the firstborn, Esau gave way to an emotional outburst of sorrow. He cried out "in an extremely loud and bitter manner," wanting to persuade his father Isaac to change his mind about blessing Jacob. Esau did not regret the unspiritual attitude that prompted him to 'despise his birthright.' No, he regretted the fact that he had lost benefits through his course of action.-Gen. 25:29-34; 27:34; Heb. 12:16, 17.

7 Another case in point is King Saul. Told by the prophet Samuel that he had disregarded God's command to devote the Amalekites to destruction, Saul tried to justify himself, insisting that he had carried out the word of Jehovah. In unmistakable terms Samuel then set forth the king's failure and added: "Since you have rejected the word of Jehovah, he accordingly rejects you from being king." Hearing this, Saul admitted: "I have sinned; for I have overstepped the order of Jehovah and your words, because I feared the people and so obeyed their voice. And now, please, pardon my sin and return with me that I may prostrate myself to Jehovah." (1 Sam. 15:17-25) But this acknowledgment of sin was not true repentance. Why not?

8 Saul still minimized his sin, trying to excuse it on the basis that he yielded to fear of the people. He did not make a heartfelt acknowledgment of his having sinned against Jehovah. His words were evidently prompted by the fear of being rejected as king and experiencing public disgrace. This is evident from Saul's plea that Samuel return with him. How so? It was not just a matter of Samuel's returning to offer an intercessory prayer in Saul's behalf. When Samuel insisted on leaving, Saul pleaded: "Honor me, please, in front of the older men of my people and in front of Israel and return with me." (1 Sam. 15:30) Thus Saul was concerned about how he would appear in the eyes of others. He wanted to be honored by Samuel's presence, not disgraced by his absence. So, Saul's admission of sin was merely an expression of his lips. It was not "sadness in a godly way" over having offended Jehovah God.

9 From what the Bible says about Esau and King Saul, we can draw some vital points that can help elders to gain insight as to whether a wrongdoer is repentant. Tears may accompany expressions of true sorrow. Nonetheless, like Esau's tears, emotional displays are not in themselves proof of repentance. By the same token, the absence of such does not necessarily mean that the erring one is unrepentant. The important thing is that the individual deeply regrets the wrong, acknowledging it as a sin against Jehovah. He would bring into question any claimed repentance if he continued to justify or excuse his actions. The individual should come

to hate the wrong course, loathing it. While there may be a natural measure of embarrassment in his having become guilty of grave sin, his primary concern should be not so much with the unpleasant consequences of his wrongdoing but, rather, the reproach he brought upon Jehovah God and the congregation of his people. He should sincerely regret having damaged his relationship with the Most High.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN TRUE REPENTANCE?

10 A person's feeling of sadness over bringing reproach upon Jehovah is not something necessarily apart or isolated from his feeling of remorse as regards harm done to his brothers and fellow humans. The apostle John shows that love for our brothers is evidence of love for God, in fact, a inseparable part thereof. (1 John 3:11, 17; 4:7, 8, 11, 12, 20, 21) Wrongdoing is always, inevitably, harmful. If ever we should become involved in some serious wrongdoing, we might well meditate on such things as these:

11 Having committed such a wrong, do we feel hurt at heart upon realizing that we have been unlike the loving upright God that we serve, acting in a selfish, even greedy way, not showing consideration for the interests of others? (1 Thess. 4:3-6) Could we really think that wrongdoing, such as immorality, could ever contribute to the true happiness of others? How much concern have we shown for their lasting good and their hope of life in God's favor? Our actions might not have directly touched others, but we still affect people by our example and influence. (Rom. 14:7) Are we, then, so self-centered that we will please ourselves even though we know we are setting a bad example, acting as a weakening influence that can erode others' spiritual strength? (Contrast Romans 15:2, 3.) According to Jesus Christ, the road to life is 'narrow and cramped and few are finding it.' (Matt. 7:14) We should know ourselves how much effort it takes to stay on the path of righteousness. So do we want to be like someone who, in effect, walks along in that narrow pathway and drops boulders that can make others stumble or at least make their progress more difficult than it already is? How unlike our heavenly Father that would be! (Isa. 40:11) As the apostle Paul states, we certainly "did not learn the Christ to be so." (Eph. 4:19-24) If we truly love and admire God and his Son for their splendid qualities, do we not feel deep shame and sorrow at acting so differently from them, betraying their trust in us? Yes, thoughts such as these are in line with true repentance.

12 Another vital part of repentance is illustrated in the case of King Manasseh of Judah . Regarding his sin, the Bible tells us: "He did on a large scale what was bad in Jehovah's eyes, to offend him." (2 Ki. 21:6) Finally, as an expression of Jehovah's judgment, Manasseh was taken captive to Babylon . There he repented. The Scriptures report: "He softened the face of Jehovah his God and kept humbling himself greatly because of the God of his forefathers. And he kept praying to Him, so that He let himself be entreated by him and He heard his request for favor and restored him to Jerusalem to his kingship." (2 Chron. 33:12, 13) Thereafter Manasseh did what he could to rectify his wrongs, clearing out idolatrous practices from his realm, sacrificing to Jehovah and encouraging the people to serve the Most High. (2 Chron. 33:15, 16) This shows that true repentance involves both abandoning the wrong course and making a determined effort to do what is right.

13 So, then, a person who is truly repentant should be able to point to "fruit that befits repentance." (Matt. 3:8) This would include the individual's putting forth reasonable efforts to rectify matters to the extent that he finds possible in his present circumstances. For example, his profession of repentance would have little substance if he showed no concern as to compensating for something he stole. Also, if he made no positive resolve to follow a right course, there would be a serious question about whether his repentance was genuine.

14 But how is the matter to be viewed if an individual's sin is very shocking and has given rise to much bad publicity? Again, whether the wrongdoer is expelled from the congregation or not depends upon his genuine repentance or lack of it.

15 Whenever evidence of sincere repentance is missing, the elders need to be careful that they do not allow themselves to be governed by sentimentality. They cannot condone wrongdoing, simply ignoring or viewing as of little consequence the reproach and trouble an unrepentant person's lawlessness has brought upon the congregation. Were they to do so, this could have a damaging effect on the congregation as a whole. Some members of the congregation might be emboldened to take liberties and to disregard the inspired counsel: "Be as free people, and yet holding your freedom, not as a blind for badness, but as slaves of God." (1 Pet. 2:16) Furthermore, the wrongdoer himself might come to regard sin lightly, exercise even less restraint in the future and get others involved in lawlessness. Wise King Solomon observed: "Because sentence against a bad work has not been executed speedily, that is why the heart of the sons of men has become fully set in them to do bad." (Eccl. 8:11) So, when the genuineness of a wrongdoer's repentance is subject to serious question and when there is clear evidence that corruption is likely to result, elders should not hesitate to heed the admonition: "Remove the wicked man from among yourselves."-1 Cor. 5:13.

WRONGDOING BY ELDERS AND MINISTERIAL SERVANTS

16 Since elders have such weighty responsibility in the Christian congregation, their conduct should certainly be exemplary. Therefore, if an elder commits a grave wrong, he is morally obligated to inform the body of elders respecting this, even though he may have repented of his error. Why? Because, having ceased to be irreprehensible, he is now disqualified from continuing to serve as an overseer. (1 Tim. 3:2) For men with serious spiritual blemishes to serve as elders would not conform to God's standard of holiness.-1 Pet. 1:15,

16; compare the law at Leviticus 21:17-23, which prohibited men of Aaron's house from carrying out priestly duties if they had a physical defect.

17 Of course, like all other members of the congregation, elders time and again fall short of reflecting Jehovah's image perfectly. Because of his repeated failings, an elder may come to feel that he no longer measures up to Scriptural requirements and may bring this to the attention of the other elders. After looking into the matter and also taking into consideration the conscientious feelings of the congregation as a whole, the other elders, however, may conclude that the kind of shortcomings involved do not call into question the man's qualifications to serve as an overseer. (See Galatians 2:11-14, where we learn of Peter's being reproved; this wrong did not disqualify him from continuing to serve as an elder.) Nevertheless, if this elder still conscientiously believes that he is no longer irreprehensible, the other elders should respect his feelings and relieve him of his responsibilities.

18 On the other hand, if there is a valid accusation against an elder or if he confesses to gross sin, the other elders should assume full responsibility for relieving him of his eldership and should reprove him as needed, imposing whatever restrictions are advisable. Or, where an unrepentant attitude on his part makes it necessary, they should take disfellowshipping action.

19 As in the case of elders, ministerial servants who become guilty of grave wrongs have a moral responsibility to let the elders know about this. Only men who are "free from accusation" are qualified to serve in that capacity. (1 Tim. 3:10) Therefore, instances of wrongdoing involving ministerial servants are dealt with like those involving elders.

20 If God requires every member of the Christian congregation to be conscientious about pleasing him and keeping clean for his service, those who are elders and ministerial servants should certainly be no less sensitive as to their conduct. They are generally more experienced in the Christian way of life and are held more responsible by God, for they are examples. (Compare Luke 12:48; 1 Peter 5:2, 3.) Even if they make a grave mistake, their sincere repentance, manifested by their turning around from their wrong and their bringing it to the attention of the body of elders, is an example. This may serve to help others who slip into serious sin to take a like repentant course. The zeal for clearing themselves before God, the earnestness, the indignation toward their own wrongs, the effort at righting the wrong, will work for the salvation of all. Moreover, it will maintain peace in the congregation—peace with God and with one another.—2 Cor. 7:11.

21 How very vital genuine repentance is! Really, because of being imperfect, we daily fail in some way to reflect the image of Jehovah God perfectly. This is something we should rightly regret. But it should not cause us to torment ourselves over every minor fault or slip. Nevertheless, the realization that we often err in word and in deed should keep us humble and help us to be merciful when others sin against us. Then, when we pray to God for forgiveness of our trespasses, we can be confident that he will be pleased with our prayers. (Matt. 6:12, 14, 15) Thus, we will enjoy a clean conscience as we continue seeking to do his will. Yes, we will be truly happy, knowing that Jehovah has forgiven our sins and that he views us as his clean servants who have before them the prospect of everlasting life.—Ps. 32:1, 2; 103:10-13.

The Watchtower, February 15, 1977 Issue, Page 110:

Insight on the News

Is Mass Absolution Effective?

. In early December 1976 a mass absolution service was performed at the Mid-South Coliseum in Memphis, Tennessee. Present in the sports arena were about 12,000 Catholics, who supposedly were thus forgiven by a bishop for their past sins without being questioned or making confession to a priest. Though general absolution has been used at times of "grave need" (as when soldiers have gone into battle), this was the first mass absolution ceremony of its kind in the United States. According to the Associated Press, "the service was designed to lure alienated Catholics, particularly divorcees, back into the fold."

Is general absolution effective? Not according to the Bible. It says nothing in favor of such a rite and does not instruct Christians to make confession to a priest. Also, there is nothing in the Bible to indicate that any imperfect individual can grant absolution from sins. Though Christians needing spiritual assistance are encouraged to seek aid from congregational elders, Jehovah God alone can pardon error. (Jas. 5:13-15) So, King David said to God: "My sin I finally confessed to you . . . And you yourself pardoned the error of my sins."—Ps. 32:1-5.