The Episcopal Church Does Hear Confessions

A Consideration of ‘The Reconciliation of a Penitent’

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In a short article from 2004, the Rev. Dr. Leonel Lake Mitchell reflects on the changes that *The 1979 Book of Common Prayer* has brought to the Episcopal Church and her liturgical life.[[1]](#footnote-1) Among the many changes, which he insists “were not innovations, but set the seal of official approval on things that were already being done in many congregations[[2]](#footnote-2),” he comments briefly about including two forms of a rite entitled *The Reconciliation of a Penitent*. These forms, which came to be included in the *BCP (1979),* make “it clear that the Episcopal Church does hear confessions.”[[3]](#footnote-3) But, how exactly this rite came into being in its present forms is not as straightforward as how some of the other changes were made to the book, which could be characterized as more as adaptations, expansions, or revitalizations of previous practice. Instead, the addition of this rite represents a real advance on behalf of members of the Standing Liturgical Commission, who, driven by the inclinations of a broader liturgical movement, designed something authentically new to the American prayer book tradition, especially in terms of the prescribed context of the rite.

Admittedly, there had been reference to ‘special’ or private confession in earlier books, even in the previous American prayer book, the *Book of Common Prayer (1928)*, but only ever within the context of the visitation of the sick. An explicit license for use outside of this context was uncertain. But, by tracing the origin of that liturgical text, gathering inspiration from then-current Anglican practice (such as a rite created by the Order of the Holy Cross[[4]](#footnote-4)), and innovation in the Roman Catholic Church, the Standing Liturgical Commission managed to produce two forms of the rite, which while new, are deeply connected to the language and theology of Anglican practice, especially drawing from one of its favorite sources, the *Book of Common Prayer (1549.)*

In this paper, I have traced the history of the production of this rite from 1549, leaning on the work of Rev. Dr. Marion J. Hatchett and Rev. Dr. John Rawlinson. I hope to explain the rite’s origin and path through the American prayerbook tradition, from the Reformation era to the time leading up to the production of the *BCP (1979),* highlighting some of the wildly divergent proposals from 1940 to 1979. I have offered my thinking on the rite as it exists today in form. Finally, I have proposed some alterations to the draft of a new resource.

Book of Common Prayer 1549 - 1552

In his *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, Hatchett notes that by simply including the rite for Ash Wednesday in the 1549 book, Thomas Cranmer expressed a “hope that the public penitential discipline of the early church would be restored.”[[5]](#footnote-5) However, that hope was primarily expressed by public, general confession in the prayer offices. That said, the *BCP 1549* contained a rubric that allowed for a form of “non-compulsory private confession,” drawn from a book produced just a year beforehand in 1548. This rubric is interesting in its own right, for its rather irenic tone, calling for those who prefer auricular and secret confession not to be offended by those who only make use of the public general confession and vice versa. However, in this way, despite apparent conflict over which was the more proper form of penitence, there is the sense that private confession can or even should be preserved. [[6]](#footnote-6)

In addition, Hatchett notes that a rubric was used for the *Visitation of the Sick*, which allowed one to make a special confession, drawing upon texts from the Sarum rite and Hermann’s Consultation.[[7]](#footnote-7) The 1552 revision altered this rubric significantly, changing both the impulse for desiring and substantially changing the theology of what was on offer. Instead of the cause of simply “being troubled,” one was encouraged to seek out confession for the reason that “no man should come to Holy Communion but with a full trust in God's mercy” and that what was received was “ghostly council, advice, and comfort as his conscience may be relieved by the ministry of God's word.” Only then could one hope to receive “the benefit of absolution to the quieting of his conscience, and avoiding of all scruple and doubtfulness.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Here, we can see that confession is framed as preparatory for the right participation in Holy Communion and, importantly, is in the service of easing conscience. I would posit that, in this way, the actual forgiveness of absolution takes a back seat to the forgiveness offered in Holy Communion, whereby confession is now seen as a means of preparation for greater sacramental forgiveness. But, this and successive prayerbooks provided no form of confession for the penitent, just a simple absolution.[[9]](#footnote-9) Rawlinson also notes that while in “the visitation, a particular absolution is provided and at the visitation’s end the second rubric gives permission for a personal confession and absolution outside the Visitation of the Sick” but that in immediately “subsequent books, the reference to private confessions [simply] did not appear.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

Successive American Prayer Books (1789-1928)

1789 sought to banish the supposed “third Sacrament.”[[11]](#footnote-11) However, there is evidence that the practice continued without an authorized rite.[[12]](#footnote-12) But, as far as the text of the Prayerbook of 1789, there was no mention of absolution, even in the *Visitation of the Sick*. However, the BCP of 1928 reinstated the practice in one spot, drawing a rubric from the *BCP 1662*, which had managed to restore the practice of confession to its *Visitation of the Sick*. If the sick were so moved, the *BCP 1928* included a rubric that invited the patient to “make a special confession,” after which “on evidence of his repentance, the Minister shall assure him of God's mercy and forgiveness."[[13]](#footnote-13) However, this is hardly a strong license for something like absolution, which would constitute actual forgiveness given by the priest to the penitent, but just a mere reminder of God’s forgiveness already given or had through other more sure means, like the two sacraments.

‘The Development of a Rite’

The mid-20th century brought significant moves toward reestablishing something like confession and absolution, which aimed at going well beyond the *BCP 1928*. In 1951, the Standing Liturgical Commission drafted an *Order for the Ministration to the Sick*, which proposed reintroducing some elements of auricular confession. The draft allowed the rite to be used publicly or privately, signaling a cautious move toward expanding the scope of private confession. Rawlinson notes that this draft represented a “middle path” between the 1549 book’s explicit provision for special confession and the 1552 book’s silence[[14]](#footnote-14) Significantly, the 1951 draft also included a rubric for “private confession, provided elsewhere, and not tied specifically to illness”[[15]](#footnote-15) While this represented a significant step toward creating a standalone rite for reconciliation, untethered from the Visitation of the Sick, there would be little further action for 15 years, in what Rawlinson terms a “quiescent period in the life of the Standing Liturgical Commission.”

In 1966, the Standing Liturgical Commission was again actively exploring the idea of a separate Service of Reconciliation, reflecting broader liturgical movement trends. In 1966, the Commission’s drafting committee proposed a “modular structure” for the rite, which included elements such as a formal confession, counseling, a discussion of the penitent’s faith, and, importantly, an absolution.[[16]](#footnote-16) At this time, the decision to rename the rite from “penance” to “reconciliation” mirrored other theological movements to revise the other rites in the Prayerbook.[[17]](#footnote-17) Perhaps this came simply from ecumenical convergence as the Roman Catholic Church, which sought to emphasize confession as an act of reconciliation with God and neighbor rather than a strictly punitive. By the late 1960s, the drafting committee had begun to include innovative provisions within the proposed rite. For example, they allowed for the possibility of confession to a layperson in extraordinary circumstances, though without an absolution, just with a simple declaration of forgiveness.[[18]](#footnote-18) However, denoting even more influence from the Roman Catholic Church and the Second Vatican Council, liturgical scholar Massey H. Shepherd Jr. shared with the Standing Liturgical Commission the wording of two forms of absolution recently approved by the Roman Catholic, one of which the drafting committee decided to include as an alternative option in the rite.[[19]](#footnote-19)

While the final form of the Reconciliation of a Penitent in the 1979 Book of Common Prayer reflects various influences and compromises, Rawlinson maintains that it remains “uniquely Anglican”[[20]](#footnote-20). However, he concludes his thinking with an interesting critique of the whole process, maintaining that, despite the Standing Liturgical Commission’s insistence that there was a pressing need for dealing with private sin and that what they were doing was largely in response to pastoral needs, there was very little comment from clergy or lay people. He writes, “The papers demonstrate that the initiative for exploring matters of confession and absolution came entirely from the membership of the Standing Liturgical Commission” and concludes that despite all the work on proposed drafts, “there was minimal clergy or lay comment about the topic.”[[21]](#footnote-21)

‘The Reconciliation of a Penitent’ as it Stands

As mentioned earlier, there are currently two forms of the rite, which, in the prefatory material and a grand departure from the previous American prayerbooks notes, “The Reconciliation of a Penitent is available for all who desire it. It is not restricted to times of sickness.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Hatchett distinguishes the two forms well in the following way, “The first is briefer and more direct. The second is a much fuller form which is particularly appropriate when a person has turned or returned to the Christian faith, or at other possible "crisis" points in a person's life.”[[23]](#footnote-23)

The first form begins with a blessing and then moves to a short form of confession for the penitent to use. This section offers a place to insert specific sins and then quickly moves to absolution. The priest then provides an assurance of forgiveness, saying, “The Lord has put away all your sins,” to which the penitent responds, “Thanks be to God.” And then something that strikes me as a bit odd–the priest says, “Go (or abide) in peace, and pray for me, a sinner.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

This is short and sweet, and it “does what it says on the tin.” But, to my mind, there are two moments that are strange. The first comes in the second option of absolution, where the priest says, “Our Lord Jesus Christ, who offered himself to be sacrificed for us to the Father, and who conferred power on his Church to forgive sins, ***absolve you through my ministry*** by the grace of the Holy Spirit, and restore you in the perfect peace of the Church. *Amen.*”[[25]](#footnote-25) The second is to request the prayer from the penitent for the priest. They seem to run in opposite directions. Yet, but both manage to go too far. On the one hand, placing the authority of absolution on “my ministry” risks a misreading that the rite’s efficacy depends on the virtue of the priest rather than on Christ, who grants the authority to bind and loose sins to his Church and is mediated through the priestly office.[[26]](#footnote-26) On the other hand, while it is certainly true that all priests are sinners in need of prayer, ending the rite with a prayer request—especially after hearing deeply personal and difficult confessions—risks coming across as false humility. Acknowledging this is standard across the tradition, I wonder how it could sound to modern ears. Ironically, this could reinforce the clericalism it likely aims to avoid.

The second form is almost three times longer. Together, the priest and penitent pray a section of *Psalm 51*. Then, in a complete reversal of the first form's ending, the penitent asks for prayer, and the priest responds by praying, “May God in his love enlighten your heart, that you may remember in truth all your sins and his unfailing mercy. *Amen.*” The priest then recites one or more of the Comfortable Words, which is thoroughly Anglican and reminiscent of the forms of general and public confession. The penitent prays a beautiful prayer, which evokes God’s grace in creation, the cross of Christ, baptism, and adoption, and then is given an opportunity to confess their particular sins. There is a moment for counsel. The penitent is asked about their intention to repent and whether they forgive those who have sinned against them. The same two options of absolution are here but reversed. Then, a longer affirmation ends with “ The Lord has put away all your sins.” The penitent responds, “Thanks be to God.”[[27]](#footnote-27)

While the second form is thoroughly Anglican in theology and beautifully composed, its downside is its length and tone. This makes it especially appropriate for serious offenses. Still, it might not make much sense for use in a penitential season like Advent or Lent, when parishioners commit to examining their lives but not in response to some serious offense.

How Might/Should It Develop Next?

I think it might be worthwhile to get clergy and lay input on how they currently use this rite, or if there is much use at all. I suspect usage is infrequent and only when urged by an eager parishioner or someone who feels they have committed a grievous sin that must be attended to. But there’s no way to know without input. I would also love to review some of the proposals developed between 1950 and 1979; I fear Shepherd’s recommendation and the updated Roman Catholic rite could have squashed some decent proposals that were more organic and ultimately more tied to our tradition.

In my view, a rite could be recommended for times of ‘ordinary penitence,’ which isn’t severe enough to demand the use of the second form. Frankly, I also wish there was something more elegant than the first form, which I think fails to achieve the priestly humility it aims at.

*A New Rite?*

As a conclusion to my paper, I’ll attempt to compose something along the lines of what I’ve proposed as an alternative to *Form 1.* *(Note: The following was written in conversation with and quotes directly from Psalm 143.*

*The Priest and Penitent begin as follows.*

Lord, hear my prayer,  
    listen to my cry for mercy;  
in your faithfulness and righteousness  
    come to my relief.  
Do not bring your servant into judgment,  
    for no one living is righteous before you.

*Penitent*   Pray for me, a sinner.

*The Priest prays*

May God teach you his will and send you the Spirit to lead you to level ground. *Amen.*

*The Priest then says the following sentence of Scripture.*

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

*1 John 1:8-10*

*The Priest then continues*

Resting on this promise of Jesus Christ, our Lord, I encourage you, as a priest in his Church, to confess your sins plainly to Almighty God.

*Penitent*

Heavenly Father, I confess that I have sinned against you.

Especially, I confess to you…

Rescue me from all my sins.

I entrust my life to you; show me the way I should go.

*The Priest may then offer words of comfort and counsel.*

Our Lord Jesus Christ has given authority to his Church to forgive sin, promising, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them.” Do you believe that the forgiveness I speak is from God?

*Penitent*

I do.

*The Priest*

As a priest in Christ’s church, and by his authority entrusted to me, I forgive you all your sins: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The Lord has preserved your life and brought you out of trouble.

*Penitent*    Thanks be to God.

1. Leonel Mitchell, “The 1979 Prayer Book and Liturgical Change in the Episcopal Church,” *Liturgy* 19, no. 2 (March 1, 2004): 38–48, https://doi.org/10.1080/04580630490428115. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mitchell, 39. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Mitchell, 44. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Rawlinson, “The Reconciliation of a Penitent: The Development of a Rite,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 88, no. 2 (2019): 152. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Marion J. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book* (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hatchett, 450. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Hatchett, 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Hatchett, 451. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Hatchett, 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Rawlinson, “The Reconciliation of a Penitent,” 143. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Rawlinson, 144. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Cf. the rite of Joseph Glanville described in Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Hatchett, 452. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Rawlinson, “The Reconciliation of a Penitent,” 145. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Rawlinson, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Rawlinson, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Rawlinson, 149. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Rawlinson, 150. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Rawlinson, 150–51. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Rawlinson, 142. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Rawlinson, 155. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, 446. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Hatchett, *Commentary on the American Prayer Book*, 453. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, 447-8. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, 448. (Emphasis mine) [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Cf. Matthew 18:18-20 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. *Book of Common Prayer*, 1979, 449-51. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)