
The General Confession

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

*Almighty and most merciful God,
We have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep,
We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts,
We have offended against thy holy laws,
We have left undone those things which we ought to have done,
And we have done those things which we ought not to have done,
But thou, O Lord, have mercy upon us,
Spare thou those who confess their faults,
Restore thou those who are penitent,
According to thy promises declared unto humankind
In Christ Jesus our Lord;
And grant, O most merciful God, for his sake,
That we may hereafter live a godly, righteous, and sober life,
To the glory of thy holy Name. Amen.*

As the world turns into a new year, this is the general confession I have been using during my own daily prayer. Some of you may recognize it from long ago. Yes, it is from the Rite I version of Daily Morning Prayer. Or, should I say, it is the old 1928 Book of Common Prayer version of the General Confession.

I have slightly altered it for the purposes of inclusive language, which is a purpose I believe in. But I also believe in tradition, and this traditional version of the General Confession is much more powerful to me than our contemporary version. Listen to those striking images: "erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep;" and "we have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts." Consider the "devices" of our own hearts.

Then, have there ever been two clauses which so completely capture human fallacy as: "We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done"? Any person who has ever prayed those lines realizes immediately what he or she is confessing.

No matter what age we are in, and no matter when we observe the beginning of a new year, most every human culture includes some notion of turning away from the old and turning toward the new. Even our own secular culture has us make "new year's resolutions," and we resolve to live differently, or to live better. The Christian tradition has a particular word for this "turning around;" that word is "repentance."

The Christian tradition also includes confession and absolution not just yearly, but daily. With every new day, we have an opportunity to begin again. It so happens that New Year's Day comes closely after Christmas and Thanksgiving, when our year seems to climax with buying and spending and eating and drinking. We need a ritualized way to begin again, and the New Year marks such a suitable custom.

But this year, 2008, will be barely a month old when we observe the great day of repentance in the Christian year: Ash Wednesday is February 6 this year. This year, we have barely over a month before we will be called to repent again. What will be the state of our New Year's Resolutions a month from now? Maybe, this year, we can use Ash Wednesday as a way to measure the progress of our resolutions today.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Rev. Sam Candler