

„Confessional Identification“ (Vicarious Repentance ?)

(Short Paper by Helmuth Eiwien Nov. 9th, 2004)

The greater context in which this topic is situated is the question, how do we deal with „the sins of the fathers“, that is, the guilt of previous generations, today?

Are there biblical examples from which we can learn how we can possibly deal with the „sins of the fathers“ and, if so, how could one describe this process?

A) In dealing with the „sins of the father,“ it's a matter of IDENTIFICATION and not substitution:

- a) **Identification** with the **sin of others (ancestors)**
- b) **Identification** with the **COLLECTIVE** (the greater „whole“ to which one belongs)

a) Identification with the Sins of Others:

The Bible makes it clear that we cannot **vicariously bear** the sins of **others**. There is only one **substitute**, who actually took on himself the sins of the sinner **in place of** the sinner and bore them away, namely **Jesus** (Isaiah 53)

We also cannot perform **substitute** (= **in place of** the guilty person) repentance **for that person's sin** and in that sense ask for forgiveness, that our repentance bring the guilty person forgiveness of sin.

Forgiveness of sin the sense of cleansing, forgiveness and salvation of the guilty person is a personal transaction that must take place between the **guilty party himself** and **God**. There is no substitution by other persons.

Thus we read, for example, in **Ezekiel 18:20**:

„Only the person who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.“

From the context of this verse, it is clear that each individual will suffer the final consequence of God's wrath, namely „**Death**“ (c.f. Romans 6:23) for his sins alone. And conversely, only the guilty person **himself** can receive forgiveness and redemption from „Death“ as the final consequence of the penalty for sin through his **own repentance**:

Ezekiel 18:21:

„If the godless man turns from his sins, which he has committed,he shall live and shall not die.“

Now, however, we must distinguish between two things concerning the question of **GUILT**:

- 1) The **GUILT itself** with its consequences for the guilty person.
- 2) The possible **RESULTS** and **EFFECTS** of guilt on **later generations**.

Concerning 1) we affirm: A guilty person can only obtain personal forgiveness of his sin through his own repentance and confession of sin – through the mediator **Jesus Christ**.

Concerning 2) the Bible says in a variety of ways that the „Sins of the fathers“ (insofar as they have not cleansed themselves of these before God), have certain **negative EFFECTS** on the **next generations**, **not** in the sense that they must also bear the sins of the fathers and therefore must also suffer the ultimate penalty for sin („Death“).

However: The **succeeding generations** can feel the **results and effects** of the sins of the fathers. **Exodus 20:5** speaks of this, where it reads:

*„For I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God, who **punishes** the iniquities of the fathers into the third and fourth generation of the children of those who hate me.“*

In **Lamentations 5:7** **Jeremiah** cries out before God:

„Our fathers have sinned and live no more, but we must bear their guilt.“

In this history of God with Israel, we see repeated examples of this.

Thus, for example, the **Exile in Assyria** is seen as a **result** of **God's** judgement on the „guilt“ of the northern kingdom of Israel and the **Exil in Babylonien** as a **result** of judgement on the „guilt“ of Judah, a tangible expression of the „sin of the fathers“ bringing suffering on the following generations.

Sin can therefore unleash a **destructive process**, which extends beyond the guilty party and reaches others.

In this sense, the Bible speaks of the negative effects of sin, not only on the individual sinner but on the successive generations, as a „**CURSE**“.

CURSE always means: God turns his face away! (Leviticus 26:17)

If God turns away from the guilty parties, this always has negative consequences for the lives of the guilty and the succeeding generations. To the extent that these succeeding generations continue in the **same sins** as their fathers, and continue this, the curse (God's turning away) can continue even for **centuries**.

Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28 speak in great detail on curse and blessing.

Here, the curse is described as a two-fold outworking of guilt:

- As an **effect** on the **guilty persons themselves** (Leviticus 26:14 – 29)
- As an **effect** on the **succeeding generations** (Leviticus 26:30 – 39; c.f. also Deuteronomy 28:32.41.46.59.64)

Daniel refers to exactly these pronouncements when he, living in exile in Babylon, of the consequences of the sins of the fathers in his prayer before God:

Daniel 9:11: *„All of Israel transgressed against your law and turned away and did not heed your voice. That is why the CURSE that he swore and that stands written in the law of Moses, the servant of God, affects us, too, because we sinned against him.“*

Daniel also talks about these negative consequences (curse) a few verses later (v.16) : *„Because of our sins and the misdeeds of our fathers, Jerusalem bears the reproach of all those who dwell near us.“*

Around two generations later, we also hear from the mouth of **NEHEMIAH** more concretely and more comprehensively how the **effects** (curse) of the „guilt of the fathers“ on the current generation of those returned from exile are described as „**bondage**“ : **Nehemiah 9, 32 –37**

Effects (=curse) of the guilt of the fathers as we find them in the Bible can vary enormously:

Mockery and contempt, displacement, subjection to foreign rule, bondage, loss of quality of life, infertility, spiritual blindness, hardness of heart, „darkness“....

Conclusions:

For us today, the important this is to recognise, **under God's leadership and revelation**, which effects and **consequences (curses)** deriving from the „sins of the fathers“ are relevant for us in God's eyes today and which continue **to this day** to have a **negative influence** on our spiritual situation.

Examples of such **negative consequences** enduring to this day could include:

- „false“ theologies, that were transmitted from generation to generation (e.g. replacement theology) and continue to have a historically negative impact to this day (spiritual blindness)
- Backwards attitudes (e.g. anti-semitism) that continue to poison us across generations
- Illnesses, sins, misfortunes that repeat in families across generations, and continue to happen today.
- A dark spiritual cloud over cities and regions that show to this day especially pronounced resistance to the light of the Gospel (blockade).
- Negative (unbiblical) agreements (in the form of documents, oaths, associations) from the past that continue to have effects on a city, region, country or church.
- Antipathies to people groups, races, other confessions or communities that continue to be felt today and that can be traced back to persecution, discrimination and marginalisation in the past..
- And much more

Essentially, what is needed is extensive **historical research** in each accompanied by **clear leadership (revelation) from the Holy Spirit** in order to find a spiritually „correct“ assessment.

b) The Individual's Identification with the Collective - Representation of the Collective by the Individual.

From a biblical perspective, it is obvious that God does not see human beings solely as **individuals** but also as part of a **larger collective** to which we belong and which also has its own history with God. For that reason we as individuals always live in a God-given identification with a collective to which we belong and from which we cannot escape. For that reason we as individuals are linked with that collective's fate, history, blessings and curses.

Collective units, named in the Bible as addressees of God's action, are the following:

Peoples, nations, languages, tribes, clans, families, cities, regions, and Christian fellowships (c.f. the 7 letters in Revelation).

The **most visible example** is the people of **Israel**. God does not merely act on and with the individual members of this people, but also with the entire people as a discrete unit. The fate, the condition of the entire people has an immediate influence on the individual member of that people.

Thus, **Daniel**, though he was not personally guilty, was part of a people that had loaded itself up with guilt and as such had to bear the **results** and consequences of this guilt personally (exile).

Conversely the people (collective) can also be **represented** before God by an individual or a group from the people. What the individual or group from the people does, whether positive or negative, has its effect on the entire **people**.

Thus the **sin of Achan** (an individual) was capable of making the **entire nation** „unclean“, as we read in Joshua 7:1:

*“But the Israelites did take some of the devoted goods; for **Achan**...took something from among the devoted goods. For this reason the Lord's wrath was kindled against the **Israelites**.”*

Here the sin of an individual is the reason that all Israel became unclean (v. 11) and, consequently, unable to take the city of Ai.

This identification and representation also has a **cross-generational significance**. The conduct of **one** generation has effects on the **next** generations because they are directly connected to the history of the acts of their collective.

This became especially apparent when the people of Israel was forced into exile due to the sins of the fathers and the **subsequent generations also had to live in exile**.

The Bible speaks quite clearly about **COLLECTIVE GUILT, which resulted in the entire collective coming under God's judgment** (e.g.: Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Sodom and Gomorra, Israel, the followers of Korah, Babylon, Jerusalem, etc).

Apparently, in cases of collective guilty, there is a measure of sin which must be full before God sends his judgement down (Genesis 15:16; Matthew 23:32, 35 –38)

Conversely, what we call **IDENTIFICATIONAL REPENTANCE** also applies:

If **individuals or groups** out of the larger collective **identify** with the sins of the collective (=sins of the fathers) and **CONFESS** them before God as guilty, the negative **CONSEQUENCES AND EFFECTS (curse)** of this guilt will be stopped and broken, so that **new era of BLESSING** can begin for the collective.

This principle of identificational repentance of individuals for the entire collection is demonstrated in the examples of **Abraham, Moses, Daniel, Nehemiah and Ezra** (for the entire nation).

The same **principle of identification** with the guilt of the collective is found in this passage:
Ezekiel 22:29-30:

„ The people in the land does violence: they rob constantly and oppress the poor and afflicted and do violence to foreigners, denying them justice.
I searched among them, to see if there was perhaps someone who would build up the wall and stand in the gap before me on behalf of the land, that I would not have to destroy it, but I found no one.”

Because the individual represents the collective in the eyes of God, individuals can also bring about positive results for the collective, that they stand in the gap for the guilty collective – not that the guilty party be forgiven because of this, but that God transform the curse RESULTING FROM this guilt into BLESSING for the current and coming generations.

This is the actual meaning of and opportunity in identificational repentance!

B) How does identificational repentance happen? (most of all in the examples of Daniel and Nehemiah)

a) Recognition and confession of the „guilt of the fathers“:

Daniel had a clear comprehension and revelation of the guilt of the fathers. He did not simply ignore, distance himself from it, deny it or sweep it under the rug, but **admitted** the guilt of the fathers, **named** it as guilt, **brought it to light** before the face of God, and **confessed** it without condemning the guilty parties. In doing this he properly identified himself with the sins of the father.

The important matter here is that the past guilt is recognised, brought to light and confessed.

And this must be done by people who represent the „fathers“(=the collective) because they are themselves a historical part of that collective.

In the case of **Daniel** and **Nehemiah**, we see that the emphasis lies on **CONFESSION**. They **confessed** the guilt of the fathers: Daniel 9:4–20; Nehemiah 1:6–9; 2:3

They named the guilt of their fathers by name, extensively, concretely and unflinchingly, and thereby brought it to light before God.

Nehemiah 1:6: „Oh, Lord, hear the prayer of your servant, that I intercede for the sons of Israel, your servants, who are before you, and with whom I confess the sins of the sons of Israel that we have committed against you.”

b) Recognition, Confession and Repentance for one’s own Guilt:

The „representative,“ who confesses the sins of the father before God includes his own guilt in this confession of guilty. He must repent (=turn around, with all of the related consequences) for his own sin in the true sense of the word.

For that reason, Daniel and Nehemiah were able to use the „we“ when speaking of the sins of their fathers and their own guilt.

Nehemiah 1:6c: *Even I and my father’s house have sinned.“*

c) Assent to judgement and punishment from God as a just act:

Daniel and Nehemiah **do not complain** about the **curse**, under which they and the current generation suffer. They do not accuse God of being unjust.

In fact, they clearly agree with God’s judgment and confess that the present curse is a **deserved result** of the guilt of their fathers.

Daniel 9:11: „All Israel transgressed your law and fell away and failed to heed your voice. For that reason, we, too, are under the curse that he swore and that stands written in the law of Moses...”

Nehemiah 9:33: „ You are right in all that you have brought upon us, we however have been godless.“

d) The Plea for God’s Merciful Intervention in the current situation:

In Daniel, this plea has two concrete components:

1) Turn your wrath from us (the current generation)! (Daniel 9:16)

Daniel does **not** ask: Lord, forgive our fathers, wash **them** clean of **their** guilt (only the fathers themselves could have done that).

Daniel instead asks for the following:

He asks God to **revoke, remove and stop** his wrath, the curse, his aversion (due to the sins of the fathers) so that these lines of the curse and calamity and the destructive effects of the „sins of the fathers“ now **come to an end** and that the people be **freed** from the effects of this guilt.

2) Turn your face to us in mercy again! (Daniel 9:17b.19)

It is exactly this request that this the actual goal of identificational repentance: May God turn the curse into BLESSING; may God, in his mercy, begin a NEW CHAPTER with us; may God turn HIS FACE toward us in new measure; may God OPEN again the heavens that have been closed because of the curse; may God take away the blindness and pour out anew the spirit of REVELATION so that HIS LIGHT can better break through.

e) Trust in the promise of God that HE will truly intervene in this sense.

In Daniel, it says: *While I was still speaking thus and confessed my sins and the sins of my people, then than man Gabriel flew close to me and said: When you began to pray, a word went forth and I come to disclose it to you.*“

What Daniel now hears is a word of promise for his people that extends far beyond his generation.

f) Concrete repentance from wrong ways and attitudes:

Identificational confession must always lead to **actions** and **attitudes** in the individual and the collective and these must be permanently visible as the **fruit** and **effect** of this confession. .

We see this fruit for example with **Nehemiah**, when the Israelites make a firm covenant as the expression of their confession that they then sign and seal. (Nehemiah 10:1ff.)

Examples of such repentance:

- **Correction** of „wrong“ theology in **teaching and practice**
- **True reconciliation**, that leads to new **conduct** and **new internal attitudes**
- **Restitution**, where the guilt can be expiated through actions.
- **Preservation** of what is „new“ through **transmission to the next generations**

C) Identificational confession must occur at different levels of representation:

The important this is that the respective levels are not perceived as „either–or“ but as necessary **complements** to each other..

Some examples of levels of this kind:

1) Representation by the individual:

The individual can be led to an act of identificational confession as a single representative of the collective in which he is integrated in accord with the leadership of the Holy Spirit:

He can do this for his family (ancestors), community, city, etc.

Daniel confessed the guilt of his forefathers as an individual.

2) Representation by the **body of Christ**:

Identificational confession can be accomplished by the **Body of Christ** on the territory of a city or region or nation. The body of Christ is always called to be **first** in such an act of confession, since it is called to by God to the ministry of reconciliation and restoration.

3) Representation by the **spiritual leadership**:

The **spiritual leaders** of a Christian community, movement, church or a country are responsible for the collective they spiritually “head”. In their responsibility they are called to confess the „guilt of the fathers“ of their collective before God.

Together with others, **Ezra** confessed the guilty of his people at the level of spiritual leadership (Ezra 9:1-4)

4) Representation by **secular „authority“**

The secular leadership of a collective (city, state or province, nation, organisation, etc.) also has a responsibility to deal with the „guilt of the fathers‘ in the right way and to the best of its knowledge. Nehemia hat als „weltlicher Leiter“ die Sünde seines Volkes vor Gott bekannt. (Nehemia 1,6)

5) Identificational confession at the **national level:**

In Nehemiah we find the example that he, as a political leader, led his **entire people** into an act of national indentificational confession. (Nehemiah 9:1ff.)

Conclusion:

Dealing with the guilt of the fathers in the sense of identificational confession is one ASPECT, which is of great importance in the search for spiritual breakthroughs in our families, communities, churches, cities, regions and our country, to the extent that the Holy Spirit leads us on this path. We may not, however, make this aspect into the absolute sine qua non without which spiritual breakthroughs cannot occur.