

Ephrata Church of the Brethren
Galen Hackman
Demolishing Strongholds
Confession
Psalm 51; 1 John 1:8-10

Let me begin this week by clearing up a few things from last week's sermon and worship time. If you missed last week's message, it is very important that you hear it. It is the foundation for what we will experience over the next several weeks. I do not have time to review it now. You can listen to the sermon online on our website, download an audio file, or read the manuscript. Copies have also been placed in the literature racks throughout the building.

Some of you thought I was announcing my intention to leave because I was frustrated with the congregation. On the contrary—I have no intention of leaving; what's worse is I have no place to go! (Of course, all of us, and especially preachers, need always to be open to a call from God.)

Also, I am not frustrated with the congregation. I am highly honored to be a part of a group of people who have responded to God in such a way that it has resulted in direct spiritual attack. I am very privileged to be the pastor of a flock that really wants to pursue God and is willing to press on through uncharted waters for a fuller and deeper experience with God.

I really felt that last week. I was humbled by the strong show of support at both services. As I stood here in the front, I was overwhelmed by the feeling of unity I experienced and the great joy of standing with the people of God in this moment. It was awesome. I am not sure I felt such unity ever before in this church, or anywhere, for that matter.

There is no doubt in my mind that Satan was seriously ticked off after last week. I know this, and so do a good number of you all, because this was a really hard week for some of you. It is no coincidence that a number of people who are connected with this church had really weird things, and sometimes tragic and difficult things, happen to them this week. Satan is seriously ticked off because he is losing the battle to derail this congregation.

As we press on through the next weeks, we will see continued attempts on the part of our enemy to pull us down and to pull us apart. We are at a really critical moment in our life together. What happens over the next few weeks, leading up to our Sacred Assembly on May 18, will define our future for generations to come. So, I caution us all; watch your back, spiritually speaking.

Be alert to those temptations to fall into ungodly and unbiblical practices. Especially be alert to the temptation to give in to a critical spirit, or a religious spirit, or any other divisive spirit that would work to tear us apart rather than build us up.

That does not mean you cannot ask questions about what is happening and where we are headed—it only means that we must all watch our attitudes.

Also, since last week I have heard some of you express surprise that I felt the spirituality of this congregation was lacking something. I heard this from people who have more recently come to us from other congregations. You expressed how, compared to where you were, the spiritual climate here is far ahead of your previous experience. That may well be, but we do not measure our spirituality against other congregations, but against the heart of God and the standard of Jesus. Remember the fourth beatitude: We shall always

hunger and thirst for righteousness that exceeds the righteousness of our current experience (Matthew 5:6).

A third question that has arisen relates to my declaration that we have come under a direct spiritual attack.

Let me be clear about this—I and your other leaders are convinced that this is the case. But remember--and Tim was getting at this at the end of the service last week—we should count it worthy to suffer for Jesus. The fact that Satan saw something here worthy of an attack should encourage us.

Some people think that as a Christian they are immune to attacks from Satan and the oppression of demons. Nothing can be further from the truth. Actually, after giving your life to Jesus you will often experience intense spiritual attacks. Why? you ask; because Satan wants you back. For insight into this, I encourage you to read *The Screwtape Letters* by C.S. Lewis.

However, here is the critical question and the reason for the emphasis this spring on spiritual strongholds:

What is it about who we are that has enabled Satan to lay siege to us as he has done?

In other words, where are the strongholds among us—those places where Satan had a strong enough foothold from which he was able to stage an assault against us.

To answer that question, and to tear down the strongholds so that we can move forward, we must all look within ourselves—each one of us. We must look at our lives personally, and we must look into our relationship with one another in the body of Christ. Where are the personal or family or generational strongholds that are impacting us spiritually? Where are the institutional strongholds as a body, as the church, that have held us back from experiencing the fullness of God and have enabled Satan to gain a foothold?

Strongholds come in a wide variety of styles. Sometimes it is baggage from our past which we have not dealt with. Bitterness, hurt, resentment, and the like, that continues to shape who we are and impact our relationships and our outlook on life.

Sometimes it is shame. Shame results when we have not fully appropriated God's forgiveness. We feel ashamed when we know we failed God, either by sins of commission or sins of omission. A sin of commission is something wrong you knowingly do. A sin of omission is something you know you should do, which you leave undone, for whatever reason.

Sometimes the stronghold relates to family systems, or institutional systems, that have contained behavioral patterns that have controlled us and have built into our lives less than healthy ways of approaching life.

Sometimes the strongholds are present because of deliberate sin on our part; things we know wound the heart of God, but we are not willing to relinquish.

This is where we are in our series, and it brings us to the focus for today.

If we are to demolish the spiritual strongholds that have rendered us vulnerable to the enemy, we must first begin by naming them. In scripture, the word for naming strongholds is confession.

The word "confession" is a translation from a Greek word which means "to say the same thing." In other words, to confess means "to agree." Spiritually speaking, in Scripture, confession is declaring our agreement with God about something.

Broadly speaking, “confession” is used two ways in Scripture.

First, it is used to describe our agreement with God about who he is and about what he asks us to believe. We call this a confession of faith.

We see this several places in the Bible. You may remember that when Solomon dedicated the great Temple in the OT, he prayed that it would be a place where the people “confess the name of God” (see 1 Kings 8:33 and 2 Chronicles 6:24; newer translations might say “praise your name” but “praise” is a translation of the Hebrew for “confess”).

Jesus taught that

whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 10:32 NKJV

These kinds of confession “are declarations of unqualified confidence in Christ, and of surrender to His service” (ISBE). I really like that.

We begin the Christian life with this kind of confession, and we sustain our faith by continually confessing unqualified confidence in Jesus and full surrender to his will.

In the Church of the Brethren heritage, we have stood in a kind of spirited opposition to creeds. We say our only creed is the entire New Testament. This is a powerful and noteworthy stand; however, its weakness lies in that it is hard to memorize the entire New Testament and equally difficult to recite it together as a joint declaration of faith.

Therefore we have sometimes lacked a way to declare our unity as brothers and sisters in faith and to declare our

unqualified confidence in Jesus and our full surrender to him.

There is tremendous power in making joint declarations of unity and allegiance. I suggest that at the beginning of this journey of demolishing strong holds, and as part of our walk toward victory over satanic attack, that it is very important for us, right now, to stand together and declare our unqualified confidence in Jesus and our full surrender to him and our unity together as brothers and sisters who are doing life together here at ECOB.

So right now, let's do that. However, as I was planning this, I hit upon a dilemma. Since we have never adopted a brief creed, and since I do not think any of us are prepared to recite the entire New Testament, what shall we declare?

We could recite the Apostle's Creed, and we have from time to time, and I have no opposition to doing that. But that is not uniquely ours. What is? As I contemplated this, I realized that we do have two unique declarations we make; one we share in common with other Church of the Brethren congregations and one is unique to ECOB. They are our baptismal vows and our purpose statement as a congregation.

Stand with me now and let's declare together our unqualified confidence in Jesus, our full surrender to him, and our unity as a people of God.

I believe Jesus Christ is the Son of God and I receive him and trust him as my Savior and Lord.

I willingly renounce Satan and all of his evil ways and I promise, with God's help, to live according to the teachings of Jesus.

I will be loyal to the Church, promising with God's help, to uphold the church with my prayers, my presence, my ministry and my financial support.

I will live for Jesus so others may know him.

(You may be seated.)

That's the one way the concept of confession is used in Scripture. The other way is in reference to sin.

1 John 1:9 is a classic verse in this regard.

If we confess our sins, he (God) is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.

To confess your sin involves two things. First, it involves being able to name your sin. That is, to identify what it is and to come clean by naming it. This is very important.

When we first come to God in faith and repentance, there is a sense in which we confess our sins in general. In other words, we acknowledge that we are sinners and that we have broken God's heart in uncountable ways. When I gave my life to Jesus as a young man, I could hardly have remembered all the individual sins that I committed against God. So I came to Jesus and I confessed my sinfulness. God heard my cry and forgave my sin. I was clean.

But I did not stay clean for long, and then I began the long journey of keeping my slate clean. This is important in our lives, not so much because our salvation is in jeopardy if we sin, but because our walk with God is in jeopardy.

So Christians are encouraged to be a people of confession—confessing our faith, but also confessing our sin. First John was written by the apostle John to a Christian church, encouraging them to be a people of confession.

In this journey toward demolishing the strongholds in our lives, confession is one of the key elements that will lead to a successful siege that eventually breaks down the walls of the stronghold.

We begin with confession—naming the stronghold. This may take careful prayer and discernment. You may want to have trusted companions listen to your heart as you share your experience. You may want to review your journaling. The goal is a simple, though complex one—you want to be able to say, here it is. This is my stronghold. This is my sin. This is my struggle.

Naming it is the beginning of the path to victory.

I said that confession of sin involves two things. The first is being able to identify it, to name it. The second is agreeing with God what the nature of it.

It may seem strange, but there are untold thousands of people who know precisely what their sin is; they know the strongholds of their lives, at least some of them. They will name them. They will confess them to you rather openly. But they have yet to agree with God about the nature of the sin.

In other words, they know it is there in their lives, and there may even be a level of realization that it is not a good thing, but they have not actually agreed with God in their heart about the sin. This part of confession moves us toward the second foundation stone that we will address next week—repentance.

(Testimony by April Hershey)

So we name our stronghold and we agree with God that it is a problem. We confess it.

There is one more thing we must consider about confession, if we are going to be biblical in our actions. We must ask, "To whom do I confess?"

The Bible gives us a series of answers to that question.

First, and naturally, we confess to God, because ultimately all sin, no matter of its nature, is against the law of God and the heart of God.

Psalms 32:3-5

*When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
your hand was heavy on me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity.
I said, "I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord."
And you forgave
the guilt of my sin.*

However, scripture also teaches that we need to confess to those we have wronged with our actions.

Matthew 5:23-24

Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to that person; then come and offer your gift.

Here the rule of thumb is that the circle of our confession should be as large as the circle of offense.

In other words, it is important that you confess to everyone that was directly impacted by your actions. The circle of confession should be as large as the circle of offence—but no larger. It may actually be harmful to you and the body of Christ, if you extend the circle of confession too far.

For example; if I were to spend the grocery money to buy new wheels for my sports car, I would need to confess to my wife and ask her forgiveness. That would be sufficient. However, if I embezzled church funds, I would need to confess to all of you, since my offence was against all of you. The circle of confession should match the circle of offence.

If I am unwilling to extend my circle of confession to include all those wronged by my action, I will not find full freedom from my sin. It may well remain a stronghold in my life and continue to hold me in bondage.

And thirdly, it is often important to confess your sin to another person who can serve as your spiritual companion. This is especially important when dealing with spiritual strongholds that have developed into patterns of behavior in our lives. This aspect of confession moves us toward the third key for victory—accountability—which we will consider in a few weeks.

James 5:16 speaks to this principle:

Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective.

Confession. This is one of the four foundations stones we must lay down if we are to defeat the strongholds of our life.

We will deal with the other three over the course of the next few weeks.

It is important that we remember that each of us bears responsibility for not only our own spiritual well being, but also for the spiritual well being of the church we are a part of. Paul teaches this clearly in 1 Corinthians 12 and other places.

Each of you is encouraged to take this journey very seriously—your spiritual health and that of the congregation is at stake. Take up the insert that is in your bulletin—the one dealing with confession. Look at it. This insert is designed as a simple tool to help you think and pray through a time of confession. Take this insert right now and put it someplace where you will remember to pick it up later today. Put it in your Bible or your pocket or your handbag. Then go find some quiet place and prayerfully read through the scriptures praying, God show me my strongholds. Name them, confess them. Seek out the people you need to talk to and confess together. Seek the insight of your spiritual partner and hear their counsel.

So let me repeat:

Each of you is encouraged to take this journey very seriously—your spiritual health and that of the congregation is at stake.