

## The Stool of Repentance “In Reformation Discipline”

Written by K B Napier

Tuesday, 17 March 2015 11:35

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I have given a fairly detailed account of the disciplinary procedure in Scottish Reformation churches under the leadership of John Knox\*. One of the ideas behind this procedure was that of public humiliation. Not in the modern sense of making a fool of someone, but in the sense of ensuring that the repentant was humble enough to acknowledge his sin before the congregation, in repentance and ensuing public acceptance back into fellowship. (\*See my book, ‘The Left Boot of Fellowship’).

One new factor at the time was the use of a ‘stool of repentance’ – a potent and visible emblem of repentance and the need for forgiveness. Today, few Christians would accept such public displays of discipline but, frankly, some indication of public humility is much needed, as so many believers feel able to sin without censure.

Presbyterians brought in the stool to help with maintaining discipline. Mostly it was used in cases of fornication/adultery. Usually the sinner stood, or sat, on the stool in full view, to receive the rebuke of the minister. The person repented before the church. This may be forgotten today – but there is certainly a need to make a public remonstrance of sin, where such sin is public knowledge and open. The practice had its bad moments, for some committed suicide rather than face the ritual at a Kirk Session, and some aborted babies if they were not married.

An alternative to this public use of a tall stool, was ‘Buttock Mail’. This was a popular-language (colloquialism) reference to a Scottish Poor Law tax, enforced by ecclesiastical courts in order to keep morality before the people. It was a fine levied on those who committed fornication. It was called ‘buttock’ because it was a term used for a prostitute. ‘Mail’ was a Scottish term for a monetary payment related to prostitution. So, it was a fine for sexual activity outside of marriage. It is difficult to understand why some could escape public humiliation, whilst others simply paid their way out of it. But, money can turn many men’s heads!

Today, according to statistics, most women (and therefore men) are guilty of this activity, and their fornication is really a form of prostitution. Even Christians are guilty of this frank, public sin, and they openly live together, unmarried, making their prostitution socially acceptable. Now, they have no shame, and there is no mechanism to cause them to be shamed, in a society that hates Christ.

The act of communal repentance was revived by the Reformation churches, as needful. Very

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often the penitent had to stand outside the church doors for a given number of Sundays, wearing rags and holding a symbol of his or her sin. Of course, some attempted to escape this humiliation, and some even moved away from their area... but when they were found to have done so, the church where they stayed would impose the discipline. Can you imagine fornicators, adulterers and homosexuals thus standing before the people today? Yet, it is still needful for this public humiliation (that is, a show of humility) to occur, otherwise sin is treated very lightly and easily.

The public stance (rags or white sheet, etc.) was, unfortunately, just a slightly altered form of Catholic ritual. Even so, we need to get back to the decrying of sin, when it has been publicly practised. The Stool of Repentance was, at that time, only otherwise practised in far-flung places such as Hungary and Transylvania. It is documented that a visitor from England entered St Giles High Kirk in Edinburgh. Looking around for a seat, he saw the high Stool and sat on it for a long time before those present advised him of its use. He left hurriedly, feeling quite foolish.

Stools tended to be of different heights for different sins (stools used by slanderers, for example, were lower than those used by fornicators), and were in full view of the congregation throughout the service. However dramatic and even poor-taste of these stools, their aim was to induce people to repent, and, hopefully, not to sin in the first place; it was a very powerful way to maintain morality.

Often, kirks had two separate doors, one for communicants and another for non-communicants. The person under discipline would stand outside the communicants' door, so that the 'good' could file past and see the repentant person. Unlike today, when repentant people are immediately forgiven and allowed fellowship, in the days of Knox and beyond, it was not so easily achieved: very rightly, a person who claimed to have repented must prove it by his new life and by subjecting himself to the humiliation. This is, by the way, scriptural.

The penitent had to sit on the stool throughout the service, in full view. Then, he would have to make a speech outlining his sin and that he had repented. It was up to the congregation to judge whether or not the tears and pleas were genuinely made. If they felt the repentant was being scornful or superficial, they imposed a further time of penance. Once they accepted the sincerity of the repentance, the sinner was accepted back into full fellowship again, with a symbolic handshake or a kiss.

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Today we might think this kind of humiliation is perhaps barbaric, but it is closer to scripture than can be imagined. Sin hurts all the Church, both universal and local. God’s word counsels nipping sin in the bud and making the sinner feel deeply his own sin, so that he repents and changes. Those in the local church had to warn the sinner, in secret at first, and then in public if he did not heed warnings, so that all Christians in the church knew of the sin. They then had to cast him out and shun him until he repented. This remains the standard by which all churches must adhere. But, to our shame, it is no longer practised, though it is scriptural. As a result sin abounds, even amongst believers.

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