

CONFESSION

The following confession was offered by Greg Jao. While the sins named here are personal and specific, they are also intimately known and immediately recognized by each one of us, and thus, this confession is echoed by our community.

Lord God,

I stand before you, and you alone, as a sinner. Even as I pray, I struggle with how do I model repentance that is personal and transparent in front of 1,500 people who are colleagues and friends?

...When I am very aware that every word I speak describes not only me, the sinful person who stands before you, Lord, but also the me who inevitably represents our senior-most national leadership who stands before them?

So, Father, because you remind me that perfect love casts out fear, I confess my imperfect love for you and for them. I am fearful, and I have enabled a culture of fear to be pervasive in InterVarsity.

I am fearful of you, Lord, because even though I have preached frequently about your grace, and even though I have invited not-yet-Christians to turn to you, who freely offers us forgiveness through Jesus' death on the cross, I don't really believe it, I think. Whether it's because I'm the first-born son of a Chinese perfectionist family or because I'm an INTJ or because I've drunk deeply of American self-help theology, I really believe you love me only when I do things right. But I cannot. I do not.

I am too introverted, Chinese, and disciplined to get angry in public often, but I confess that I have killed hundreds – or even thousands – with the judgmental and cutting words that fill my mind. I am too churched and awkward to be publicly licentious, but if I acted on my lusts I know I would be fired quickly and rightly. And, even as I think about my greatest fear if I were to do these things, I have to admit that my greatest fear is the public shame and exposure – not that I have sinned against you.

And because of that, I try really hard to be as perfect as I can – not because I long to be holy as you are holy – but because I want to avoid exposure and shame. And I confess before you, the only true God, the idolatry that represents. I worship the image of myself more than I worship you. I worship the opinion of others more than I worship you. I sacrifice so much to these idols that have led me to fear and perfectionism and secrecy and shame and guilt. I am so tired, and I cannot stop. I am too proud to really want your grace. And my fear proves that I do not really believe you will offer me grace. Help me Lord.

As a national leader, I also confess that I've led the people gathered here to sacrifice to these idols all the time. I grew up spiritually in this environment of pride, I have drunk deeply of its idolatries, and I now enable it as a national leader. I am a man of unclean lips, who lives among a people of unclean lips, and who now leads and enables their unclean lips.

And, because of pride, I know we've turned the gifts you've given us into idols that lead to our destruction. We're known as a movement that values thoughtfulness and thinking well, but we've turned that into compulsive critique and criticism. I know all my StrengthsFinders lie in this one small area and so I know I enable this as a leader. Lord have mercy.

We're known as a ministry that values Scripture study, but it hasn't led us to humility. Instead, it's led us to disdain others who don't study Scripture like we do. They're too fill-in-the-blank, too superficial, too proof-text-y, too culturally-bound. And I know my academic pretensions lie firmly in this place, and so I enable this as a leader. Lord have mercy.

We have taken the hard-won, blood-watered, Spirit-sustained commitment to ethnic reconciliation and justice, and we're still humbled by the ways our systems and assumptions remain inherently inequitable. The pains experienced around MPD, promotion, and retention remain unequally distributed because of the historic racism and racialization and sexism and ableism and heteronormativity in our culture. And, yet, even in trying to craft this sentence before you Lord, I am terribly aware of how I am trying to think of which communities will parse what I say and how they want me to say it or need me to say it or hope I will not say it that I'm really thinking about them, more than praying to you. And that shapes the ways we do and don't lament and repent because we fear each other, Lord, often more than we fear you. We fear making a mistake that will label us as cross-culturally clumsy or an Uncle Tom.

I am a Chinese American – a man, cis-, hetero, who sits uneasily between places of privilege and marginalization. I benefit from the privilege and weaponized marginality when it benefits me, and so I enable this as a leader. Lord, have mercy.

We judge other ministries, churches and Christians if they don't understand like we understand, do as we say they should, or weep as we weep. Lord, it's so easy to turn lament and confession into a performance or weaponize it against the sins of the church – which I usually mean the sins of Christians with whom I differ – Christians who, if I am honest, I hold in contempt. Christians who you love, who you intend to renew, and who you intend to unite with me in one body before you. When I do this, I declare that I do not trust your Holy Spirit to lead us into righteousness, and I do not believe Jesus Christ will present us as a body perfect before you one day. I deny you with every contemptuous word I think and feel.

Lord, I name my sins – which are the sins of my community – and for which I, as a leader, am responsible.

Lord, have mercy. Christ, have mercy. Lord, have mercy on me, a sinner, and on our community, a community of sinners who we believe, by faith, you intend to extend grace.

A note from Greg:

It's humbling to share this with you: Humbling to confess my sins in front of our staff community at SC20 and humbling to think that you might be reading this now. Some spiritually mature friends have questioned whether this should be distributed. It makes an at-that-moment confession both permanent and potentially public—with all the scrutiny and critique that may bring. After some prayer, my sense is that (a) If my confession was genuine in the moment, then I should own my own sins days or weeks later; (b) leaders should own their sin and the sins they enable; and (c) I trust my staff colleagues will extend grace to me. My confession wasn't meant to be comprehensive. There are many more sins, both personal and systemic, which need to be named. But, in the context of SC20 and the five minutes I was given, this is what the Lord led me to pray.