

Lent and Confession

During the season of Lent it is appropriate to ask: “*What does it mean to be confessional?*”

From the Scriptures there seem to be four primary statements about confession. The first is directed at every human being. The second marks a distinction between unbelievers and believers. The third distinguishes between pseudo-believers and true believers. The fourth demonstrates the form that true confession takes in the life of the true believer.

I. That at the Name of Jesus Every Knee Should Bow and Every Tongue Should Confess

This is the proclamation of St. Paul in his epistle to the Philippians, which is the appointed Epistle reading for Palm Sunday.

Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Philippians 2:5-11 (NKJV)

In this proclamation the apostle declares that at the Last Day in particular every creature in the universe will of its own accord acknowledge the truth. When Jesus comes again in His glory, all unbelief will be burned up by His glory. Every creature, every man, woman, child, and angel will bow down and confess the truth, that Jesus Christ is Lord. No atheism or agnosticism will survive the second coming of the Lord of glory. When the universe dissolves, with mankind and all the angels standing before the God of all creation, no one will continue in arrogance. Every knee shall bow and every tongue shall confess the truth.

In many ways this has already begun even now. For example, who has ever heard of anyone cursing in the name of Allah, or Buddha, or any of the pseudo-gods. Why does Hollywood never use any of the many names of the other gods of other religions to make strong statements? Why is this? The answer is actually very plain. When people want to make a strong statement, they call upon the most powerful name available to them. When people want to curse or swear or make an emphatic point, they call upon a name that has the power to do that for them. People instinctively know that the names of other gods have no real power. But the name of Jesus, the one true God, who has offered Himself as the Savior of the world and has accomplished that impossible victory, His name has ALL power. At His name the most powerful of the demons are rendered powerless and must submit. Even legions of demons bow to the power of His name, as the demoniacs demonstrate when they come out to Jesus and confess Him as the Son of God in Matthew 8:28-29.

When He had come to the other side, to the country of the Gergesenes, there met Him two demon-possessed men, coming out of the tombs, exceedingly fierce, so that no one could pass that way. And suddenly they cried out, saying, "What have we to do with You, Jesus, You Son of God? Have You come here to torment us before the time?"

The demons know the power of the name of Jesus. And so do men, even though they try to hide from the truth. Those who deny Jesus with their lives actually confess Him with their lips quite frequently. In fact, there are many people who do not know how to finish a sentence without in some way calling upon the name of the Lord. They misuse His name, but they use it nonetheless.

This kind of confession of Jesus is common to all creatures. It is not a confession that flows from faith. This confession is simply the unavoidable fact of reality. Jesus Christ is Lord.

II. No One can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit

There is a second confession of Jesus as Lord that comes from another source. This is the work of the Holy Spirit in a person's heart to confess Jesus from a relationship of trust and reliance upon Him as not only the inescapable Lord of the universe, but also as the gracious Lord of Life.

St. Paul writes to the Corinthians, **"Therefore I make known to you that no one speaking by the Spirit of God calls Jesus accursed, and no one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy Spirit."** (1 Cor 12:3)

Here we observe the distinction between the confession of unbelievers and believers. It is impossible to operate from any degree of reason and deny completely that Jesus is Lord. People may turn in arrogant pride to their own delusions, but it is not possible to deny Jesus in every way. The creature knows its Creator. Mankind especially knows his Creator, being created in His very image. God wrote His law upon the hearts of all men. This knowledge is displayed in the existence of governments and laws in attempts to maintain at least some sense of order and justice for daily living.

Yet still, the sinful heart turns away from the Lord. The sinful heart desires to make its own way in the world. Yet the truth remains apparent. Moreover, the Holy Spirit continues to call to the world through the preaching of the Church and even through nature. But only through the preaching of the Gospel can anyone actually encounter the Lord Jesus. This is why the Church is despised in the world. The Church is the very body of Christ and His perpetual call to repentance and faith. The world cannot avoid facing the Lord while the Church exists. Therefore they persecute the Church and mock her preaching. The Holy Spirit comes to them with the Gospel, but they recoil with resentment and anger. Then they curse the name of Jesus because it is the only way by which they can ultimately refuse the Holy Spirit's loving invitation and urging. St. Paul demonstrated this in his life before the Lord's intervention on the road to Damascus.

Truly the Holy Spirit is continually at work calling all sinners to repentance and faith. For those who do hear the Gospel and receive the gift of faith, the command to be baptized is

given, whereby the Holy Spirit is poured out upon the sinner to make him holy and pure. From this powerful indwelling of the Holy Spirit a true confession of Jesus is born in the person so that this person begins to call upon Jesus as Lord. This confession of Jesus comes from a heart that is moved by God's love to trust in Him and to rely upon Him in everything. This is the beginning of a life of true confession.

III. Whoever Confesses Me Before Men

Therefore whoever confesses Me before men, him I will also confess before My Father who is in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, him I will also deny before My Father who is in heaven. (Matt 10:32-42)

Since this confession of Jesus involves the person's entire being, it is absolutely impossible to keep this confession private. This confession of Jesus incorporates the person entirely into Christ and into His body. This newborn reliance and trust in God's love and mercy draws the person to continue in this Holy Communion established by God. The person is irresistibly moved to seek the body of Christ where this true confession of Jesus is nurtured and kept alive. The true believer cannot exist apart from this confession of the Holy Communion of Saints.

Yet many so-called Christians try. Some tell themselves that they do not have to participate in "a church" in order to be a Christian. Yet as soon as the person embraces this lie, his reliance shifts from God's love to his own love. It is no longer the confession of Jesus that drives the person's life, but the confession of the person's own "faith." **"I can believe"** becomes the person's motto. **"I can believe without subjecting myself to others."** By this the person begins to deny Jesus as Lord. No longer does the person confess Jesus and rely upon Him, but begins to rely upon his own reason and his own designs. Christ established His Church for the life of the saints. This person determines that he knows better how to save himself apart from what Christ has established. His confession is no longer one of faith in Jesus as Lord.

There is a more subtle way of denying Jesus before men, too. This seems very noble and appeals to a person's sensibilities. This false confession involves great religiosity. People who deny Jesus in this way do so with inestimable devotion. They build great buildings. They invest large portions of their earthly wealth. They sacrifice enormous amounts of time. They gather for most if not all of the occasions for worship that are available. They go out of their way to show love and tolerance for others. They are patient and kind to everyone. They smile and make people feel welcome. They pray, praise, and give thanks continually.

Yet for all this, their confession is false. They convince themselves that they are confessing Jesus, but in reality they are confessing themselves. They join themselves to their own works and their own confession. They make themselves a communal lord of the Church. They bind themselves to one another, gathering to hear "faithful preaching" and to confess the creeds and to worship God in love. They speak the name of Jesus. They reach out with the Gospel. Yet all this remains a false confession, a pseudo-confession. They are like those of whom John writes in John 12:42-43, **"Nevertheless even among the rulers many believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they did not confess Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God."**

Yes, for all the talk about confessing Jesus as Lord, the real lord in their lives is the associations of friends and family and church. So they confess Jesus with their lips but not with their hearts. They bind themselves in communion with those who practice falsely. Why? Because they love the praise or fellowship of men more than the praise or fellowship of Christ. In reality, they are no different than the person who becomes convinced that “**I can believe**” is what really matters, and not the communion to which one is bound. To those who cry out and say that this is not of God, they cast them aside and drive them into little gatherings where the Holy Communion of Christ is recognized as St. Paul declares in 1 Corinthians 11:27-29.

Therefore whoever eats this bread or drinks this cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of the body and blood of the Lord. But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord’s body.

Truly there are many like the Corinthians whom the apostle upbraided so strongly. Truly there are many who discern not the Lord’s body, but their own body. They are convinced that they confess the Communion of Christ, but in truth they confess a communion of their own making. And so they go through all the right motions and say all the right things believing that they are proclaiming the Lord’s death till He comes. Yet they reject those who confess the death of Jesus as everything and embrace those who add to and subtract from the sufficiency of the grace of the Lord.

Nevertheless, as the apostle writes to the Galatians:

Do not be deceived, God is not mocked; for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap. For he who sows to his flesh will of the flesh reap corruption, but he who sows to the Spirit will of the Spirit reap everlasting life.

The pseudo-communions grow and flourish, but so does the dissension and strife. The focus becomes more and more on what they do and less and less upon the confession of Jesus and what He has done and does for His Church. They form little Bible studies of their own rather than studying together and uniting in common faith. They pick and choose pastors and other leaders to suit their own definitions of the truth. They form their variations of worship style and hold a variety of services to please each constituent group among them. Yet they tell themselves that they are one church of one common confession of the same Lord. They love the praise of men more than the praise of God.

Yet truly God is not mocked. For He does gather to Himself His little flock who know no Lord but Jesus. They often have no great buildings. They often have few resources. Yet they are content and at peace in the knowledge that they confess Jesus as Lord, and only Jesus as Lord. They receive no recognition as a glorious and splendid church. The world pays them hardly any attention at all. They simply gather together in the name of the Lord Jesus and confess together, “**He truly is all that we need.**” They hear the same message preached at every service. They chant the same liturgy together. They wrestle with God in the Scriptures until they share a common understanding of the faith. They joyfully confess this faith together without wavering in understanding. They come to the Holy Communion as one body and proclaim the same Lord together and receive Him in unity. They proclaim the Lord’s death with the same

understanding and reliance upon Him before one another and before the world. They rise up together and hear their Lord proclaim, “**Amen.**”

IV. If We Confess Our Sins

Finally, the true confession takes on a peculiar form in the life of the true believer. The true confession changes the believer’s heart and mind completely. No longer does the person concern himself with his own accomplishments. Rather he counts all his own accomplishments as filthiness and confesses them as such. He not only bows the knee in recognition of the sovereignty of God over all things, but he especially bows the knee in confession of the sovereignty of God’s grace in Christ Jesus. This is where the true difference is observed between those who confess Jesus as Lord from faith and those who confess Him as Lord merely as fact.

If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

(1 John 1:6-10)

Faith in Jesus changes a person completely. The person realizes that he is without any hope apart from the saving grace of Jesus. The true confession does not embrace any works of man, not even works of worship. Rather, the true confession denounces everything except Jesus. The true confession is displayed when the person bows before his Lord along with all others who know Jesus as Lord and confesses with them his own unworthiness of anything good and of any praise whatsoever, so as to look up to receive forgiveness and healing and peace from the only one who can give it. When this is what confessing Jesus as Lord means to the person, Jesus truly is his Lord in every way. Then the person is truly free from every other obstacle to true faith. Then the person has only one real focus in life, and shares that focus with the true communion of saints. Then he recognizes the body of Christ and gathers in His body to receive from his Lord every good gift that has been prepared for him.

Conclusion

In the end true confession has nothing to do with the one confessing. It has everything to do with the one being confessed. True confession is not really the work of the individual, but of the Holy Spirit. True confession is not about what a person believes and not about the person’s personal faith, but about the one to whom this faith looks and trusts. The true confession is entirely about Jesus, the Lord. It is His wondrous work in us through the Holy Spirit. It is His activity in the life of the believer to bind the believer to Jesus and to keep the believer safe in His grace, mercy, and peace. True confession is not really an action on our part, but rather the life that God gives us in communion with Him. True confession is the living expression of faith at work in us, by God’s grace. Truly it is a confession of Jesus, and through this confession He rules our hearts as our loving Lord. How good it is to confess Jesus as Lord!