



# TO Confess

## A WORD STUDY

By Mark A. Rathel

THE CONCEPT OF “confession” is an important part of a Christian’s experience. Many Christians correlate confession with the beginning of the Christian life. The acknowledgment of our status as sinners and our profession of allegiance to Jesus express integral aspects of Christian conversion. The New Testament, however, does not limit the role of confession to the beginning of the Christian life, when the new believer confesses his or her faith in Christ. This act of confession, a confession that leads to repentance of sin, is an essential part of a believer’s spiritual life. As Baptist theologian W. T. Conner wrote, “It [repentance] is an attitude that belongs to the Christian life as a whole. The initial act of

repentance is the beginning of a life of repentance.”<sup>1</sup>

The Greek verb for the act of confession is *homologeō*. This compound word derives from two other Greek words: *homo*, meaning “like,” and *logos*, meaning “word” or “thing spoken.” The Greek verb for the act of confession, then, has a range of usages including “promise,” “agree,” “admit,” “confess (sins),” and “publicly declare (that one is something).”<sup>2</sup>

### Backgrounds of “Confession”

The various contexts in which the vocabulary of “confession” occurred in documents written prior to the New Testament provide understanding in how the readers of Romans would have understood the concept of confession. “Confession”

functioned as an important concept in legal and religious contexts.

The concept of “confession” occurred predominately as a legal term with the connotation of “agree with.” The Greek noun “confession” frequently described a contractual agreement. Numerous Greek papyri discovered in Egypt bear this meaning.<sup>3</sup> A common heading for a last will or testament is “contract and agreement (*homologia*).” The papyri describe a contract laborer as a “confessor” (*homologos*). Another of the papyri uses the verb form meaning “to agree with.” It is a legal document: “We acknowledge (*homologeō*) that we divided between ourselves at the present time the vineyard which we hold on lease.”<sup>4</sup>

The religious usage of “confession” correlates and builds upon the



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**Left: A spring at Caesarea Philippi. Also known as Banias, Caesarea Philippi was a site dedicated to the worship of several gods in the time of Christ. At Caesarea Philippi, Simon Peter made his great Christological confession, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16, KJV).**

**Right: Victory scene of Rome’s Emperor Marcus Aurelius (reigned A.D. 161-180) with those he had conquered bow-**

**ing to him. The first year of his reign, Rome went to war against the Parthian army. The Romans were finally victorious, and the war ended in 166. The returning soldiers brought back home with them, though, a deadly disease (likely smallpox or measles) that spread throughout the Empire for the next several years. Though he had been victorious in battle, the disease likely proved fatal even to Marcus Aurelius.**



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legal background. In a manner similar to which one confessed wrongdoing in a court, one acknowledged or confessed sins before a deity. An individual publicly professed allegiance to a deity by means of an oath of confession.<sup>5</sup>

The *Septuagint*, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, contains a unique usage of the idea of confession. The translators of the *Septuagint* frequently translated the Hebrew word *yada*, “to confess, to praise, to give thanks,” by means of the verb *exomologeō*, a related word with the same meaning as *homologeō*, mentioned above. The Israelites “confessed praise” of God’s majestic power (1 Chron. 29:12), as well as His mighty acts of redemption (Ps. 105:1-6). Frequently, worship provided the setting for the confession of praise to Yahweh. The

Greek translation of Psalm 100:4 provides evidence of “confession” as an act of praise. “Enter into His courts by means of giving thanks (*exomologeō*), and his courts with hymns; give thanks (*exomologeō*) and praise his name.”<sup>6</sup>

### “Confession” in Romans

Paul used Greek words for “confess” four times in Romans. Twice he used the term *homologeō* highlighting public allegiance to Jesus (Rom. 10:9-10). He used *exomologeō* twice in quotations from the *Septuagint* in the sense of confessing praise (Rom. 14:11; 15:9). The concept of confession in Romans used both the legal and *Septuagint* background.

*Romans 10:9-10*—A discussion contrasting two kinds of righteousness supplies the immediate context for Paul’s use of “confession” in Romans 10:9-10. On the one hand, a perfect, unmerited kind of righteousness is available from God through faith. On the other hand, many Jews pursued self-righteousness through works of the law. In Romans 10:1-13, Paul quoted the Old Testament six times to reassure his readers that the Old Testament itself taught that righteousness comes by faith. One of his quotes, Deuteronomy 30:14 (see Rom. 10:8), affirmed that a heart faith brings righteousness.

In Romans 10:9-10, Paul set forth three pairs of related truths in describing how an individual receives salvation. First, Paul linked confessing with the mouth to believing with the heart. Faith and confession involve doctrinal content, namely, the lordship of Christ. In light of the over six-thousand times the *Septuagint* translates “LORD” for “Yahweh,” an avowal of the lordship of Christ affirms His deity. The public confession “Jesus is Lord” flows out of an inward heart attitude of trust. Faith inevitably flows outward in a public pledge of allegiance to the person of Christ. Second, Paul linked righteousness with salvation—salvation that originates with a person’s believing with his or her heart. Salvation means that God provides humans with righteousness as a gift through Christ. Third, Paul linked believing that Jesus is Lord with His being raised from the dead. As it was with the women who finally recognized the resurrected Christ at the empty tomb, as it was with Jesus’ post-resurrection encounter with Thomas and his subsequent confession of faith, so it has been

**LESSON REFERENCE**  
BSFL: Romans 10; 14; 15



**Left:** Historically, religions have focused on a type of judgment. For instance, these gold balances are believed to symbolize the weighing of the soul in the underworld. A butterfly (symbol of the soul) is depicted on the disks. Found southwest of Corinth within the Mycenaean citadel; dated 16-15 B.C. Also representative of judgment are the archways on Jerusalem's Temple Mount. A Muslim legend holds that the scales of good and evil will be hung from the eastern arcade on the Day of Judgment.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/KEEN TOUCHTON (3/28/11)

SCALES: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/GB HOWELL/ATHENS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM (3/5/2/09)

for followers of Jesus through the centuries: Christ's death and subsequent resurrection confirm His lordship.

*Romans 14:11*—Although we do not see it in the English translations, Paul again used the Greek term *homologeō* to talk about confessing praise to God. In *Romans 14:11*, Paul uses the *Septuagint* version of *Isaiah 45:23*: “As I live, says the Lord, every knee will bow to Me, and every tongue will give praise to God” (HCSB, emphasis added). The dispute between “weak” and “strong” Christians differing on the subject of eating meat offered to idols functions as the immediate context for this Old Testament quote. Paul challenged his readers not to judge each other for two reasons. First, they are brothers despite their differences. Second, all believers will stand before God's judgment seat (*14:10*). *Isaiah 45* celebrates the nature of God as the world's only Creator, Savior, and Judge. The action of bowing the knee depicts submission. The action of the tongue portrays a confession of praise, even in the context of judgment.

*Romans 15:9*—Paul's final reference to confession in *Romans* occurs in chapter 15. The immediate context is a final plea for unity in the Roman church (vv. 1-13). Since Christ accepted the individual believer, the individual believer should accept other Christians (v. 7). Christ serves the Jews as well as the Gentiles (or nations), the most visible human divide in the first century (v. 8). Paul brought together four Old Testament citations to demonstrate that both Jew and Gentile belong to the community of the Messiah. In *Romans 15:9*, Paul quoted *Psalm 18:49*. The psalm described events in David's life and David's consequent desire to praise God's name among the Gentiles. The fact that Paul cites this Scripture passage as supportive of a ministry of Christ to Jews and Gentiles indicates that the apostle interpreted this psalm as a prophecy of the Messiah. Paul's letter to the Roman believers affirms that Jesus, then, is the speaker who confesses praise to God among the Gentiles.<sup>7</sup>

### Implications for Believers

Paul's teaching regarding the act of confessing offers numerous implications for the Christian life.

First, the act of confessing “Jesus is Lord” serves as a public oath of allegiance to the Person of Christ as full Deity. Second, Christians can disagree about matters non-essential to the gospel and recognize that God alone is the Judge. All Christians will bow in submission to the Creator-Savior-Judge and confess praise. Third, Christ Himself confesses praise among the Gentiles or nations as they glorify God for His mercy. Christ, then, is our Example in praise for the nations coming to salvation. **B**

1. Walter T. Conner, *The Gospel of Redemption* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1945), 199.

2. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, “ὁμολογέω” in *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 2nd ed. rev. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979), 568; Dieter Fürst, “Confess” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, gen. ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids: Regency Reference Library, 1986), 1:344.

3. The term “papyri” describes documents written on writing materials made from the papyrus reed.

4. The entire discussion about “confession” in the Greek papyri comes from James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament: Illustrated from the Papyri and other Non-Literary Sources* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952), 449.

5. Fürst, 344.

6. Author's translation of *Psalm 100:4*.

7. Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 878-79.

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