

What Is Confession?

D. W. Bailey

Introduction – Matt 10:32-33; I John 1:8-10

Much like repentance (the subject of our previous study), another tremendously important Bible subject – a subject upon which our salvation depends – is *confession*. What does the Bible teach about this subject?

I. Confession Defined

There are two Greek words most often translated *confess*, *confessed*, or *confession* in the English versions of the Bible:

A. *Homologeō* – lit. Gr. “to speak the same”

- To confess, declare, admit – cf. **John 1:20, I John 1:9**
- To declare openly by way of speaking out freely from deep conviction – cf. **Matt 10:32-33; Rom 10:9-10**
- To “speak the same” means to utter with one’s lips the very truth that God already knows: to verbally agree with the judgment and will of God
- Ex. I Sam 12:13 – David proclaimed, “I have sinned against the Lord.”

B. *Exomologeō* – lit. Gr. “to speak out”

- To confess forth, freely and openly – cf. **Matt 3:6; James 5:16**
- Not necessarily true that *homologeō* refers to private confessions while *exomologeō* refers to public confession
- Both words mean to confess freely and openly, while *exomologeō* is a more forceful and intense (according to Vine’s) form of the word

II. Confession Of Jesus Christ As The Son Of God

Confession of Jesus Christ means to “speak the same thing” as God concerning Jesus: openly declaring that Jesus Christ is the Son of God.

A. *Confession Of A Life Lived For Christ*

- It is true that in some aspect the way we live and the truths we continually proclaim are an ongoing confession of Christ
- See **Matt 10:32-33**
- When you stand for the gospel and God’s will before your friends, coworkers, etc; or when you take the time to speak what the gospel speaks about some issue in conversation with others, you declare Christ and your loyalty to Him before men
- It is impossible to be a faithful Christian while at the same time denying Christ in your words and deeds!

B. *Confession Of Christ Made Before Baptism*

- The New Testament also speaks of a specific confession of Christ made at a particular time:
 - Distinguished from all other confessions, **I Tim 6:12-13**

- What did Christ confess? Both before Caiaphas (Matt 26:63-64) and Pilate (John 18:36-37), Christ did not shirk away from the truth that He was the Christ, the Son of God, and the King of the Jews, even though this confession paved His way to the cross!
 - A confession that all Christians share in common – **Heb 3:1, 4:14, 10:23**
 - **II Cor 9:13**, the Corinthians at some point made a confession of the gospel – and these Christians were *living* that confession in obedience to God
- What is this confession, on which the whole gospel stands? See **Matt 16:13-18**.
- When is this confession made:
 - At the time one is saved, **Rom 10:9-10**
 - Before being baptized for the remission of sins, **Acts 8:37ff**

The Biblical picture of a person who is willing to confess Jesus Christ is that a penitent believer in the gospel pronounces verbally and before a witness (or witnesses) that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and then obeys the gospel in being baptized “for the remission of sin” (see Acts 2:38; Mark 16:16).

- Note that the New Testament does not state *who* one must confess this truth to, any more than it specifies *who* must baptize a person in water
- A confession of Christ as the Son of God must simply be verbally expressed before a person is baptized in water in the presence of at least a witness (cf. Acts 8:37), or even many witnesses (cf. I Tim 6:12)

III. Confession Of Sins To Gain Forgiveness

Now, there are a whole host of other passages in the New Testament that speak of confession, not in the sense of declaring that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, but in the sense of a person confessing the sins he or she has committed in order to gain forgiveness of those sins. Remember, *confession* means “to speak the same thing” – and when a person confesses his sins, he simply acknowledges verbally that he is now in agreement with God that his past actions were not in accordance with God’s will.

A. *Is Such A Confession Really Necessary?*

- **James 5:16** – Much has been said and written about the phrase “that you may be healed,” and a comprehensive discussion may be the subject of our studies at a later date. For the purposes of this lesson, we are considering the primary result of confession of sins: the forgiveness of sins, i.e. spiritual healing (see **I Pet 3:24**). In this passage, such healing from sins is conditioned upon confession of sins!
- **I John 1:8-10** – Again, the forgiveness of sins can only be attained if the Christians is willing to confess his or her sins before God.

Notice that both of these passages are written, not to unbelievers, but to Christians – people who previously obeyed the gospel to gain salvation but have since sinned and are in need of God’s forgiveness. The New Testament pattern for such a situation *is not* that a person should be baptized again, neither is it that a person should just keep on sinning expecting their previous baptism to continually wash away sins. Rather, the penitent Christian who recognizes his or her sins and wishes to gain God’s forgiveness *must* be willing to verbally acknowledge those sins by

confessing them openly. Now, this truth opens up several important questions: a) *who should Christians confess their sins to*; and b) *how should such confessions be made*?

Perversion of these two passages has led to all kinds of doctrines in the religious world that cannot be traced back to the Bible. Some religious groups teach that confession should be made only individually and privately to a special class or order of organizational leaders. Other groups have latched on to the popular idea of “prayer partners” – that confession should be made individually and privately between two people of the same congregation, and that satisfies all the requirements of James 5 and I John 1. What does the Bible tell us about how and to whom confession should be made?

B. How Should We Confess Our Sins?

- I John 1:9 “If we confess our sins...”; Jam 5:16 “Confess your sins (trespasses)...”
 - Admit honestly and openly what you’ve done and that you are in need of forgiveness and prayers.
 - *Does not* say “Confess that you’ve sinned”!
 - This is not an ambiguous, general confession where the hearer is left wondering and confused as to what exactly you’ve done wrong!
 - **Acts 19:18-19** – As the Ephesians were taught *by the apostles* to turn from their sins, they came “confessing and telling their deeds.”
- **Prov 28:13** – Confession demands “uncovering” of sins: we might confess ambiguously that we *have sinned* while still leaving all our sins covered up and totally unknown to all who hear!
 - “*and forsakes them...*” – Confession is made with intent to change, to do better: true confession is made from a heart full of repentance!

C. Who Do We Confess Our Sins To?

- From the very beginning of God’s relationship with mankind, He has demanded that sinners confess their sins to Him: all sin is primarily and foremost an affront and offense to the God who made us and sustains us!
 - Lev 16:21; Num 5:5ff; Josh 7:19; II Chron 30:22 – Old Testament examples
 - **Ps 51:1-4** – David was not ignoring the terrible crimes he had committed against his wife, his family, Bathsheba, Uriah, or indeed all Israel – but he realized that the root of all his atrocities was in his sin against God and His will (see also **Ps 32:5**)!
 - All of our sins must be confessed to the Lord in order to gain forgiveness, and this is evidently the primary scope of I John 1:8-9 – confession made to God.
- However, James 5:16 makes it clear that at least some occasions demand confession made not only to God but “*to one another*” – that is, to other Christians who also have weaknesses themselves. What does the Bible teach concerning when confession needs to be made in the presence of other people?
 - Matt 5:23-26 – “your brother has something against you...” – Christ demands that we make confession, and express our repentance, to the people we sin against, i.e. to the people harmed by our actions!
 - Luke 15:21 – The prodigal son sinned against God (“heaven”) and against his father, and so he made confession both before God and before his father

- Bottom line: if you have sinned and in doing so have harmed others, you need to make a confession before God *and* before those you've harmed!
 - Usury (I Cor 6:7), gossip and slander (I Tim 3:11, 5:13; Jam 4:11), corrupting words (Eph 4:29), etc.
 - Bringing reproach upon others, damaging their influence – see **II Sam 12:14; I Cor 6:6, 10:32; I Tim 5:14**, etc.
 - Acts 19:18-19 – The Ephesians sorcerers burned their books and made confession in the presence of all (i.e. publically) because their offenses were committed “in the presence of all” and thus amends needed to be made “in the presence of all.”
 - These verses clearly show that there are occasions when sins must be confessed before the entire church, not just before one or two people in private!

IV. Some Things Confession *Does Not Do*

A. *Confession Is Meaningless Without Repentance*

- **Prov 28:13; Acts 8:22, 26:20; Rev 2:5** – A confession made from a heart that is intent on continuing in the same transgression is a meaningless confession that results in no forgiveness at all!
- **II Cor 7:2-12** – Surely confessions were made by the erring Corinthians, but note how strongly Paul approved of and encouraged their *repentance*!
- To believe that a simply confession will wipe away sins if there is no repentance and change of heart and deeds is to misuse the Scriptures and impose upon the forgiveness and mercy of God!

B. *Confession Does Not Wipe Away The Consequences Of Actions*

- **II Sam 12:13-14** – (with Ps 51) David's confession and repentance did not erase the consequences of his sins.
- **Josh 7:20-25** – Achin's confession did not erase the consequences of his sins.
- **Rom 13:4; I Pet 4:15-16** – Sins and crimes against other people may carry serious consequences that are not simply wiped away by the forgiveness of God!

Conclusions:

What we desperately need to understand is that confession is not something to be feared and dreaded, and it's certainly not an action to be ashamed of:

- Jam 3:2 – We all stumble in *many* things...
- I John 1:9 – If we say that we don't sin, we deceive ourselves and make God a liar!

So rather than being ashamed and fearful of confession, we need to understand that confession is absolutely vital to our spiritual growth as the children of God. It's vital in accessing the mercy of God through the blood of Christ in order to gain forgiveness (cf. I John 1:8). It's vital in letting our brethren know that we need their help, support and prayers (cf. Acts 8:24; Gal 6:2). And what a blessing it is to know that God is ready to forgive, to lift off the guilt and shame caused by sin – and that our brethren are ready to forgive, too, and to pray for us and help in our time of need!