

On confessing and believing

Genesis 37:1–4, 12–28
Psalm 105:1–6, 16–22, 45b
Romans 10:5–15
Matthew 14:22–33

Text: Romans 10:9-10

because if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For one believes with the heart and so is justified, and one confesses with the mouth and so is saved.

Introduction

Are Canadians racist? In the late spring and early summer, the news was filled with stories regarding anti-racism protests and the topic of racism dominated media at all levels. We don't like to think of Canada as a country where racism reigns; we don't like to think of ourselves as racist. Peter Stockland is a senior writer with Cardus, an independent Canadian think tank that emerged from a desire to translate the richness of the Christian faith tradition into the public square for the common good. In his article [Facing the Root of Racism](#) Stockland wrote, "Canada is full of racism for the same reason places of worship are filled with sinners."

As I read Stockland's article against the backdrop of other media discussions of racism it became obvious that people approached this issue from quite different understandings of human life. Stockland's assumption is that people stand before God. Naked. I don't mean without clothes, I mean exposed, nothing hidden, the movements of each human's heart completely known. We may be able to hide our prejudices from others through politeness but not so with God. Those negative attitudes towards others because of their race that bubble up in our hearts, attitudes imbibed from lots of places and experience, requires constant vigilance to quell.

As Christians navigate the landscape of cultural issues like racism our starting point shapes everything about our response. It is the same for people who do not share our starting point; their starting point shapes them as well. As we converge in conversation in the public square on a topic, any topic, the divergence of these starting points becomes evident. It is one of the reasons we seem to talk past one another.

For the Christian, Jesus Christ is the starting and ending point. The love of God for every human being is the same seen in the self-forgetful, self-giving of the Son on the cross for our sin. The gospel, the good news that is Jesus Christ, shapes our understanding for everything about life. Our neighbour, any neighbour, is a person for whom Jesus died and loves beyond our imagination (just as Jesus loves us). Our treatment of our neighbour is, for the Christian, guided by this love of our Lord. It follows that racist attitudes of all kinds need to be repudiated.

A point I raise with you is that in these societal conversations we discover that there is no shared beginning point. The idea, for example, that humans have intrinsic value because they bear the image of God, once commonly shared in our society, can no longer be assumed in any discussion. I wonder if the church became complacent during those days of shared values and let

up on the importance of teaching gospel perspectives. It behooves us Christians to recognize that things have changed. In this era where different narratives lead to quite different trajectories for living life, Christians need to know the gospel. We need to be schooled in its logic. This is one of the reasons I have chosen to preach through Romans this summer, Paul's great tome on the gospel. And so I invite you to reflect with me as we probe something of what it means to "confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead."

1. In speaking of confessing and believing in this way, the Apostle Paul is describing the believer's experience of saving faith. Faith, biblically speaking, is relationship with God. Confessing and believing is to engage the salvation God won for us in Christ's life given for us. Paul isn't offering people a formula for acquiring an 'admit one' ticket past the proverbial pearly gates. He is offering people Christ; he is describing the nature of relationship with Christ; to know Jesus is to know life eternal. Confessing and believing, in the gospel, is about being saved.

Clare Carlisle, in her biography of the philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, recounts the story of Kierkegaard preaching one of his sermons.¹ It is September 1st, 1848, and he is preaching at Friday communion in the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen. As he stands before Thorvaldsen's massive statue of Christ, he takes as the subject of his discourse a verse from John's gospel (12:32), 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.' He explains to the small congregation that following Christ will lift them above worldly concerns. 'If a man's life is not to be frittered away, being emptily employed with what while it lasts is vanity and when it is past is nothingness, or busily employed with what makes a noise in the moment but has no echo in eternity, then there must be something higher that draws it,' he tells them in his soft expressive voice.

Outside the church, the streets and the newspapers are noisy with electioneering: on October 5th all men, even peasants, will vote for members of the assembly which will draw up Denmark's new constitution. But Kierkegaard's sole concern is the spiritual life. The louder the public clamor about these things, the more decisively he sets himself against them: all that matters religiously he insists is the 'inwardness' of each human being 'not seeking to be a power in the external world'.

Whatever the noise of our world that consumes the streets and media, Jesus Christ stands among us insisting that we need saving. Kierkegaard is a brilliant philosopher and yet he insists that something, someone higher has to draw us up if our lives are to be more than what makes noise in the moment but has no echo in eternity. In the Roman world of Paul's day philosophers abounded espousing pathways and programs for a meaningful life. Paul has a brilliant mind and could have achieved much in the possibilities his world afforded him for a rich life. Yet here he is insisting that salvation in Jesus Christ is what we humans need.

When I say that I have little confidence in the human spirit I am not meaning to say that there is something wrong with being human. God came among us in the man Jesus of Nazareth—being human is a fit vehicle for the living God. The problem is that we humans are sinners. Yes, I have personally been the beneficiary of what we call the milk of human kindness from many

¹ Clare Carlisle, *Philosopher of the Heart: The Restless Life of Soren Kierkegaard*, Penguin, 2019. P. 130

places. There is much good will that occurs daily among people; people of varying religious commitment. As happy as all that is, the point the gospel makes is that this won't save us. Paul had just written of his fellow Jews. "I can testify that they have a zeal for God, but it is not enlightened. For, being ignorant of the righteousness that comes from God, and seeking to establish their own, they have not submitted to God's righteousness." God insists we need saving. And being zealous for God or being zealous for doing good like ending racism won't save us if the zealousness is an attempt to establish our own righteousness.

2. Confessing with your lips that Jesus is Lord. In the wake of Jesus' encounter with the Pharisee Saul on his journey to Damascus, the Christian apostle Paul came to understand that Jesus of Nazareth, who had been exalted by God, was both Israel's Messiah and humanity's Lord. This leads Paul to a radical reorientation of his life. Paul comes to understand that God's redemptive plan has ever been looking forward to bringing it to a climax in the person, ministry, and saving work of Jesus of Nazareth. And because Jesus is humanity's Lord the word from the prophet Joel takes on new meaning for Paul; "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved." Therefore, no distinction is to be made by ethnicity; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him.

The confession "Jesus is Lord" stands for much more than saying these three words. "Jesus is Lord" is considered to be a title or summary phrase that stood for an early church creed confessed at baptism. Paul speaks of this confession in his first letter to the Corinthians when he says "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit. When the gospel speaks of confessing our sin, for example, confessing means that we agree with God that we are sinners. To confess "Jesus is Lord" is to orient our life to the reality of his Lordship of everything.

Confession with our lips is more than merely the things we say, though it surely includes our speech. "Confessing with our lips" is an expression that includes the conduct of our life. It is akin to the Hebrew image of "walking" as a metaphor for the believers' pattern of life shaped by the commitment of obedience to God. Jesus insisted that our word and practice line up; that we practise what we preach.

To confess "Jesus is Lord" is subversive in a world filled with many lords. Christians in the Roman empire found themselves in an awkward place because the Emperor required an annual act of ritual commitment to the Emperor's lordship. Christians confessing that Jesus is Lord understood there is no other; they refused to participate in the Emperor's ritual and, consequently, were accused of sedition. The theologian Karl Barth was removed from his teaching position at gunpoint in the University of Bonn in Germany for his opposition to Hitler having insisted that Jesus Christ is the one Word of God whom we have to trust and obey. In our culture Christian voices are marginalized and silenced in government, education, and corporations.

But there are other things that press to be lords of our lives. Wealth, prestige, power—these and their cousins lure for dominance. And even good things like family and career push to be first. Confessing "Jesus is Lord" is to permeate the Christian's life at every level.

The gospel asserts that Jesus has been given the place of authority over everything in heaven and on earth. In Paul's Ephesian letter he says that Christ is at right of the Father far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and that God put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things. To confess "Jesus is Lord" is to confess reality—to reorient life in accord with the true nature of our existence.

To confess "Jesus is Lord" is to know ourselves loved beyond measure. There are lots of deists in our world that confess a vague notion of some being who created. It was Aristotle who advanced the idea of the 'prime mover'. Everything in the universe has a cause he postulated a first uncaused cause—something gets it going. The point being, does this 'prime mover' or 'creator' love us? We discover in Jesus Christ that God loves us beyond our imagining and that his steadfast love endures forever. We then learn that this One who loves is our Creator.

3. Believing in your heart that God raised Jesus from the dead. There is more here than giving some sort of mental assent to the facticity of the resurrection of Jesus Christ—it includes that, to be sure. Like the confession 'Jesus is Lord' standing for so much more, so also 'believing in your heart that God raised him from the dead.' In the Apostolic proclamation the resurrection of Jesus is vindication that Jesus' life and death has achieved all that he set out to do for our salvation. This phrase—"God raised him from the dead"—is a kind of shorthand for all that Jesus came to do. To believe this is to embrace our Lord's saving work as your own.

What does it mean to believe in your heart? Faith in scripture is a kind of knowing; it is akin to knowing that the one dearest in life loves you. This is what it means to believe in your heart. The heart, thinking biblically, is the seat of our affections, understanding and will. Note we are commanded to love God with all that we are. It is in our hearts that we know ourselves loved by Jesus. Believing in your heart includes organizing the loves of your life so that love for him comes first. Believing in our hearts touches on what is dear to us; on who is dear to us; on who enthuses us.

John Bunyan, the best-known Puritan author (*Pilgrim's Progress*), came to faith in Jesus Christ when he accidentally overheard four impoverished women talking naturally among themselves while taking a break from homemaking tasks. He overheard them speak of what it meant to them to be bathed in God's love for them, what it meant to know Jesus. "They sounded to me as though they had found a new world", Bunyan wrote later. The four women had. He came upon them when they were talking as unselfconsciously as we talk about — about what? about what matters to us.

4. We read today of Jesus walking on water and of Peter's sinking experience. Jesus called his disciples 'little faiths'. If the disciples had trouble with the story, and they were in the boat, what shot do we have? Rather than take this as chastisement about our weak faith and vacillations in believing, take hold of the encouragement that is here. Note that Jesus reached out and rescues a sinking Peter—it isn't the strength of our faith that saves but the power of the one who saves.

"if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved," exudes the Apostle Paul. Why is this salvation? The answer—Jesus Christ.