

What Is the Meaning of “Confess” in Romans 10:9-10?

⁹ that if you confess with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. ¹⁰ For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth confession is made unto salvation.

In chapters 3 and 4 of Romans, The apostle Paul established beyond dispute that one is eternally justified before God only on the basis of faith alone in Jesus Christ alone. Why, then, does he say in chapter 10 that one must “confess the Lord Jesus” for salvation?

Some unacceptable views

A number of explanations for the meaning of *confess* conflict with Paul’s view of justification-salvation through faith alone. For example, if confess means that a person must make an audible, verbal declaration of faith in Jesus to another person or to a Christian gathering, this is an addition to faith alone. The same would be true if confession is interpreted as public Christian baptism or Christian conduct. The issue is further complicated when one interprets “confess the Lord Jesus” as some sort of commitment that makes Jesus Master of all of one’s life. This certainly contradicts the free gift of righteousness through faith alone.

The word itself

We find some help in understanding the word *confess* from its Greek origin, *homologeō*. The roots *homo*, means *same*, and *logeō*, to *speak*, thus, *to say the same thing*, or *agree*. *Confess* means to share a common view, or to concede or admit that something is true. There is nothing about the word itself that demands a public or oral declaration to others. Twice in Romans, the confession is made to God (14:11; 15:9; compare its use in 1 John 1:9).

The context

Paul is primarily writing to the Jews in Rome (10:1-3), though this truth applies to all people (10:4, 11-13). His Jewish countrymen were not eternally saved, because they had rejected Christ’s righteousness while trying to establish their own (10:3). The Jews needed to *believe* in Jesus Christ as their Messiah; in other words, they needed to *confess* Him, to admit that only Jesus could give them righteousness. *Confess*, therefore, has the same significance as *believe* (compare how *confess* is used in 1 John 2:23; 4:2-3; 2 John 7). The confession, as with faith, is directed toward God, not men. Faith is the prominent issue in the context (10:4, 6, 11, 14, 17). Paul’s interchange of *confess* and *believe* in verses 9-11 point to a similar meaning, as do believing and calling on the Lord in verses 11-13.

The quote from Deuteronomy

In verses 6-8, Paul quotes Deuteronomy 30:12-14 to remind the Jews of what they had already heard and even perhaps had memorized. They did not need to search extensively for God's righteousness. It was and is readily available—as near as their mouths and hearts. All the Jews need to do is agree with or admit the truth of God's Old Testament testimony of righteousness in the Messiah, to believe in Jesus Christ. The mouth and heart are intrinsically connected (Matt. 12:34; Luke 6:45) as reflected both in the Deuteronomy quote and Paul's use of it.

To “confess the Lord Jesus” simply means to admit that Jesus is who God said He is, the Messiah and Savior. The designation “Lord” in verse 9 and in the quote from Joel 2:32 in verse 13 translate the divine name *YHWH*, which has the primary significance of deity. To make it mean *mastery* appears arbitrary, since Jesus' deity includes many divine roles (Creator, Judge, High Priest, etc.).

An alternate view

There is another view of *confess* in this passage that does not contradict Paul's teaching of justification through faith alone. This view starts with the premise that the wrath experienced by mankind (1:18) is temporal and does not include eternal wrath or condemnation. Romans 10:9-13 explains how the Jews can escape God's temporal wrath from their persecuting enemies. To confess the Lord Jesus and call on the name of the Lord means to publically join the worship of the believing community. However, the promise of God's righteousness and salvation in the context of Romans 10 is not exclusively to the Jews (10:4, 11-13). This view also interprets salvation as purely temporal and points to Paul's use of Joel 2:32 in verse 13 as a promise to Israel for deliverance from their enemies in the last days. While this is true, the future deliverance of Israel from her enemies coincides with her spiritual deliverance from condemnation (Obad. 17; Zech 12:1-10). Paul may have been using this as a general principle that all who call on (believe) God for deliverance (including eternal salvation) will have their faith answered. While this view is consistent with eternal salvation as a free gift, it does not adequately address the dominant context of Israel's lack of righteousness and how they can obtain it (10:1-8).

Conclusion

Given the emphasis in the context on Israel's lack of faith to secure God's righteousness, *confess* seems to be used in light of Deuteronomy 30:12-14 to refer to Israel's (and anyone's) need to agree with God that righteousness is only through the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ. It is readily available to those who admit God was and is right. As Paul taught earlier (chapters 3-4), the righteousness of God does not come by our own effort or anything we do. It comes only through faith in God's testimony about the divine Savior, Jesus.