



*Five Lessons from Acts*

# TIMELESS

# CHURCH

P. Adam McClendon & Jared E. Lockhart

**BH**  
ACADEMIC  
NASHVILLE, TENNESSEE

*Timeless Church*

Copyright © 2020 by P. Adam McClendon and Jared E. Lockhart

Published by B&H Academic  
Nashville, Tennessee

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 978-1-5359-9478-1

Dewey Decimal Classification: 262.7

Subject Heading: CHURCH / BIBLE N.T. ACTS—STUDY AND TEACHING /  
CHURCH RENEWAL

Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version. ESV® Text Edition: 2016. Copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a publishing ministry of Good News Publishers.

Scripture quotations marked CSB are taken from The Christian Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible®, and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers, all rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked NASB are taken from the NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE®, Copyright © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission.

All italics in Scripture quotations are author additions used for emphasis.

The Web addresses referenced in this book were live and correct at the time of the book's publication but may be subject to change.

Cover design by Darren Welch. Cover images © iStock and Lightstock.

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 VP 25 24 23 22 21 20

Jared:

*To my parents, Barry and Jonavieve Lockhart, thank you for faithfully passing on the good deposit of the gospel and raising me in the community of God's people.*

*In loving memory of Barry D. Lockhart (1963–2019)*

Adam:

*Thank you, Springhill Baptist Church, for allowing these truths to be studied, taught, cultivated, and practiced. You are a special place, and I'm privileged to have been part of your story.*

*Thank you, Bedrock Community Church, for living these characteristics out and demonstrating an unwavering confidence in God's Word and ways.*

# CONTENTS

Introduction . . . . .	1
1. Confessing Church: We Believe in Jesus . . . . .	3
2. Gathering Church: We Live in Community . . . . .	33
3. Praying Church: We Submit to God . . . . .	55
4. Giving Church: We Consider Others . . . . .	79
5. Engaging Church: We Pursue the Lost . . . . .	99
Conclusion . . . . .	123
Appendix . . . . .	125
P.R.A.Y. Model for Prayer . . . . .	127
Private or Corporate Prayer Guides . . . . .	129
Scripture Index . . . . .	157

# INTRODUCTION

If you have ever bought a piece of furniture from a big-box store like IKEA, then you are familiar with the detailed set of instructions that come with the product. The multipage document containing them is always prominently placed in the packaging and provides a step-by-step approach to putting the furniture together. The instructions vary on how intelligible they actually are; but on the whole, they provide a detailed picture for assembly.

The book you hold in your hands is not like those instructions. This is not an instruction manual for doing church. This is not a how-to church book. This is not a detailed, step-by-step approach that will explain all there is to know about the church or all there is to know about doing church. It is more of an overview than a step-by-step guide. We have pulled out five foundational characteristics of the early church that are evidenced in the book of Acts, and we have sought to show why they are just as important for the modern church seeking to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. This application-based approach flows from the conviction that the New Testament, and particularly Acts, does not merely provide us with a description of how the church formed and grew, but those writings provide us with God's prescription for how he desires for his church to function for all time. Thus, if the Bible provides a structure for his church, it is imperative that we know and conform to that structure over and against our pragmatic tendencies.

We wrote this book because we love the church of our Lord Jesus and desire

to see (1) others grow in their love for the church, (2) more people faithfully living out the call of Christ in their church communities, and, (3) overall, we seek to make much of Jesus, who considers the church his bride. Know that we have been praying for you. We pray that God uses this book in your life and that he uses it to build and edify his church.

Maybe you are a faithful churchgoer and want to refresh your understanding of the church. Maybe you have been attending church for years, but have some doubt as to why. Maybe you are a small group or church leader and need to get back to basics. Maybe you are a new believer and want to know more about the church. Maybe you are not a Christian and want to understand what church is for Christians. No matter who you are or what your motive is for picking up this book, we hope to point you to Jesus and honor his bride as we lay out some of the basics about the church. With that being said, this book is specifically designed to aid those new to their faith in Christ, or those who have never gone deep in that relationship, in considering the church's purpose in God's plan and in their own lives. Church leaders, small group facilitators, and church planters can also greatly benefit from the discussion in this book. This can be a good resource to help you in discussing and leading others through their questions about the church and even to prepare your own heart and mind for consideration of foundational ecclesiological (that is, church-related) issues.

The hope is that this book provides a foundation that can be built upon by your church gathering. We do not answer all the questions or cover all the passages that have relevant, even important things to say about the church. This is an overview of some of the most important characteristics; however, we have also included many practical illustrations and application points. The goal is for this book to be a useful resource. You will find at the end of each chapter some discussion questions along with a five-day devotional. Be sure to check out the appendix for some additional resources.

While it is not essential, we suggest you read this book with others. Your experience will be heightened by having a community around you to discuss, think, and bounce ideas off of. Small groups may want to consider walking through this book as well. We have done our best to include the text of Scripture because that is where spiritual power lies: not in our words, but in the Word of God. Do not allow this book or any other to replace your time in the Word; allow this to push you deeper into the Word of God.

CHAPTER 1

# CONFESSING CHURCH: We Believe in Jesus

Grounding all activity in the central confession of Jesus as the Messiah was a central characteristic of the early church as detailed in the book of Acts.

And they *devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching* and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42–47)

## **What Makes a Church?**

When the Lord got a hold on my life, I (Adam) began attending a church as the result of a friend's invitation. Looking back these many years later,

I realize that I unintentionally viewed church as more of a department store than a place of worship. The central question lurking behind all my observations was, “Does it have what I need?” I was a consumer seeking to receive, ignorant of the call to serve and love others in community. My time needed to be well spent and my needs met. Shortly after I began attending this church, it became a refuge: a home away from home. A love for the people blossomed in my heart. I soon invited others to church, to join me in this wonderful journey. However, my invitation to them focused around individual preferences, like I was pointing out trinkets at a sales booth. I promoted my church to others based on how it would accommodate them, serve them, and fulfill them. I was too young and immature to think past this approach to bigger questions, like these:

- Does this church proclaim biblical beliefs and doctrine?
- Does it have a biblical leadership structure?
- Does it foster and celebrate biblical community?
- Does it engage culture with the gospel?
- Does it make much of Jesus and challenge people to live in obedience to him?

By fixating on the programs and services of the church, as good and helpful as they were, I missed what it means for the church to be the church.

These many years later, as I talk to people, coach and encourage leaders within various denominations, and work with parachurch organizations, I find we tend to promote dynamic preaching, a meaningful worship experience, good programming for children, and a solid youth ministry. Now, do not get me wrong: I hope that our churches have all of these. Yet in the midst of these more experience-oriented programs, we must not lose sight of the central confession that defines and determines a Christian church. What makes a Christian church is not just its activity in gathering but its confession of specific truths. This word *confession* is not one commonly used in our culture, but it is an important concept that makes all the difference. Confession is central to church, and without it, a true Christian church cannot exist. Additionally, when this confession is in place, it grounds and brings purpose to all other activities, programs, and experiences—but we are getting ahead of ourselves. First, we must discuss what is meant by the word *confession* and why it is so important.

### Confessing Love

My wife, Adrienne, and I met when I was fifteen. Here is the story of how we did, and how I came to love this amazing woman. At fifteen I was dysfunctional on many levels. I was dealing with some deep emotional scars from so much that had happened in my life already. I was even wrestling with whether I wanted to live. One night, I was in a horrible car accident that should have taken my life. God used that event to give me a desire not just to live, but to find and live out his purpose for my life. I began searching as never before.

A couple of weeks later, sitting in class at school, a young man named Chad invited me to church. Chad and his parents began picking me up and taking me to the Wednesday night youth group. This place was safe and quickly became my refuge. That first Wednesday night, I walked in wearing my cool leather jacket and reeking of cologne—a little really does go a long way, but I just felt a little more would go a little further. Frankly, I was ridiculous. But that night, several people, including Adrienne, took time to talk to me. They genuinely seemed to want to get to know me, to hear my story, and to encourage me in my walk with God. It was like precious ointment on my wounded soul.

Adrienne, two other students, and I quickly became the best of friends. They were regularly picking me up for church, and we were all together every weekend, with rare exceptions. These people were my family during this time, and God began a great work in my life. Through this youth group, our amazing youth pastor, his wife, and these friends, I sensed a call into full-time vocational ministry.

Adrienne and I had a great friendship during this season of my life. We never dated; we simply cherished our friendship and challenged each other to cling to Christ. She was one year ahead of me in school. After graduating, she went to college in Tennessee, while two months into my senior year, I became convinced that the Lord was leading me to serve in the military as a missionary. One evening right before leaving for the military, while Adrienne was home visiting for the summer, I was hanging out at her house. As we were enjoying each other's company, suddenly I looked deep into her eyes and realized for the first time that I saw her as more than a friend. That evening, I kissed her. Shortly after that night, I left for boot camp, and Adrienne began her sophomore year of college. We never spoke of the kiss.

Right after boot camp, my youth pastor, who also worked with the college and young adults in our church, invited me to a college retreat. I was especially excited when I discovered Adrienne was going to be there too. That

weekend, as we all hung out and walked, I held her hand, still never mentioning the kiss. Avoiding the issue was not going to fly with her, however. She wanted to know what I was doing and where we were with our relationship. I remember saying something like, “I care deeply for you and cherish our friendship, but I can’t go further. I’m not going to date you unless I know you are the woman I’m going to marry.”

Then, with amazing confidence, she looked at me and said, “Well, I already know I’m going to marry you.”

I laughed out loud and responded, “No, you don’t.”

“Yes, I do,” she replied calmly.

“Well, I don’t know that.”

What she said next shocked me even more: “That’s okay. I’ll wait on you.”

About three months later, I was in a military training school. I could not stop thinking and praying about our conversation. I remember thinking about the type of woman I wanted to be with when I was seventy years old, after fifty years of marriage. *Adrienne is exactly the type of woman I want to be with*, I thought, so *why should I keep looking for what I’ve already found?* It was then that I committed and decided to confess my love for her and ask her to be my girlfriend. In doing so, it was as if I was asking her to marry me one day, because that purpose was behind it.

What is the point of this story, other than providing a lot of detail about my past? The point is this: a moment came, through a variety of divinely directed circumstances, when I realized my genuine love and commitment to Adrienne, and I confessed it to her.

### **What Does “Confession” Actually Mean?**

Confession is more than just silent belief. It is the expression and proclamation of beliefs for an individual or a collective group of people. A confession is proclaimed both privately and publicly. In confessing my love for Adrienne, I was proclaiming what I believed to be true. A confession can either be written or spoken, but more than that, a confession must be believed and lived. Its truth must show in the way the one who confesses it lives.

The church has confessed her beliefs in written documents since her inception in the first-century AD. These confessions are found in the writings of individuals (such as the apostle Paul and early church fathers) and in the writings of groups and councils (such as the First London Baptist Confession and

the Westminster Confession of Faith).<sup>1</sup> Early in the history of the church, a number of doctrines arose that set apart individuals as Christians and groups as Christian churches.<sup>2</sup> Among these doctrines were a biblical understanding of the Trinity, that Christ was born of a virgin, and that the Bible is the Word of God.<sup>3</sup> These doctrines, among others, were seen as most distinctive of Christianity and among the most essential biblical doctrines. Affirming these accepted beliefs set individuals apart as orthodox Christians; however, even before these, there was and still is today a confession even more central and foundational, as it has been central since the beginning of Jesus's ministry.

This confession was at the heart of Jesus's interactions with his own disciples. This most central confession of the church is found in Acts 5:42: "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and preaching that *the Christ is Jesus*." This central confession that "Jesus is the Christ" is the root to the trunk of the early church and is found all over the book of Acts (e.g., 2:22–36; 3:13–26; 4:10–12; 5:42; 8:12; 10:34–43; 11:17; 16:31; 17:2–3; 18:5, 28; 20:21; 24:24). Acts is an important text for understanding the central confession of the early church because this book outlines the movement of the Spirit of God in and through the disciples as they take the message and Spirit of Jesus to the ends of the earth.<sup>4</sup> The central confession that Jesus is the Christ is what animates the disciples and pushes them to action: actions that are documented in the book of Acts. This truth that Jesus is the Christ is the central confession of the church. The Scriptures lay this out quite clearly. In Matthew 16 we read:

He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it." (vv. 15–18)

---

<sup>1</sup> The First London Baptist Confession was penned in 1644, and the Westminster Confession of Faith was penned in 1646. Some other influential and well-known written corporate confessions include the Reformed Heidelberg Catechism of 1563 and, more recently, the Baptist New Hampshire Confession of Faith of 1833.

<sup>2</sup> The word *doctrine* simply refers to a belief (right or wrong) that is held by a particular group.

<sup>3</sup> This list is by no means exhaustive of the core beliefs of the Christian church.

<sup>4</sup> Acts 1:8 reads, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my [Jesus's] witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth." The book of Acts is an unfolding of this prophetic statement by Jesus. It presents a historical record of Spirit-empowered saints taking the confession regarding Jesus as the Christ to the ends of the earth and seeing masses of people repent of their sins and be born again by placing their personal faith in Jesus as their Lord and Savior.

Peter here clearly and succinctly confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of Israel, but what is most important about this passage is Jesus's reaction. Jesus affirms this truth wholeheartedly. He may as well have said, "You are absolutely right! That is correct!" However, notice that he goes beyond simply acknowledging Peter's confession as theologically correct; Jesus suggests that this confession is the foundation of the church. Jesus as the Christ is the truth on which the church is to be built. It is the foundational truth that buttresses all others for the people of God and all creation. But, what exactly does that mean?

The title "Christ" means "Anointed One." The title is applied to Jesus and is used to show that Jesus is the promised Jewish Messiah. The Messiah is the anticipated Old Testament figure who is to be the fulfillment of the promises of God. The promise of the Messiah goes all the way back to Gen 3:15. After Adam and Eve rebel against God by disobeying his command not to eat the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, there are consequences. Among other things, they have to leave the goodness of Eden, but there is also a great promise. God says to the snake, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (v. 15). This promised one will defeat evil forever, but in the process the snake will bite his heel.

Later in the book of Genesis, God (eventually) chooses a man named Abraham through whose descendants the world will be blessed. The implication is that the Messiah will be the preeminent one among those descendants. Soon the narrative winds its way to one of those descendants, Judah. God promises that a king will come from his line, one who will unite the whole world and under whose reign there will be peace and prosperity. This is the Messiah.

In time, a great man from the line of Judah becomes king. Though he is described as a man after God's own heart (1 Sam 13:14), David fails and sins. He is not the one.

As the story of Israel—the nation descended from Abraham—continues, each successive generation of kings seems more wicked than the last, until rival kingdoms take over and Israel is reduced to a sort of vassal state. In fact, at this point, the nation goes into exile, and for a time there are no more kings to fulfill the promise. It seems the plan of God has been thwarted. But prophets during this time keep talking about the promise, reminding the people that God is faithful and he will provide the foretold king. One prophet in particular speaks about the coming Messiah and his defeat of death. Isaiah seems to suggest that the Messiah himself will die, then resurrect, and as a result of his own fatal wound (that Gen 3:15 prophesied), he will be able to

heal others of the darkness and sin within them (Isaiah 52–53). The canon of the Old Testament closes, and this king still has not come.

The New Testament opens with Jesus as the central character, and the Gospel writers do all they can to show us the true identity of this God-man. He is the promised one, the Messiah. We learn that he is of the line of Abraham, Judah, and David. He begins to cleanse people of the evil effects of the fall by healing disease and forgiving sin. He is the promised Deliverer, Savior, and King (Isa 9:6–7; 53:5–6; Dan 7:13–14; Luke 2:11). He is the one who will rule justly, as prophesied in the Davidic covenant (1 Chr 7:11–14). He is the perfect human, the perfect King, and the one who will save and deliver his people—not from foreign occupying armies, but from the corruption of sin and the finality of death. As this act of the story begins to be triumphant, Jesus starts telling his closest followers that he must die, but that through this death he will truly master death for the whole world. Jesus is, in fact, crucified and rises again three days later. This is the central event of the New Testament, the Bible, and all of human history. Since this perfect King died the painful death of a criminal, some assumed him to be a failed revolutionary. But this too was prophesied. The prophet Isaiah says of him:

He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he opened not his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. . . . Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied, by his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he poured out his soul to death and was numbered with the transgressors; yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. (Isa 53:7, 11–12)

Evidenced in this passage and others like it is the truth that Jesus is a King who not only rules justly for his people, but he also dies on their behalf. He is the crucified one. The kingdom of God was to be established by the Messiah through his fulfillment of the law and bearing the judgment for sin on behalf of those who would trust in him. Jesus, as the Messiah, lived a perfect human life to fulfill the law and died on a Roman cross as the sacrifice for the sins of those who would trust in him for salvation. The rest of the New Testament, then, expounds this event and shows that when we are united to Christ by

faith, he heals us and we can invite others in to experience the healing of the King as well.

To the surprise of the Jews, Jesus is not just the Jewish Messiah; he is the Savior, Deliverer, and rightful King of the whole world. That is the message the apostles preached (Acts 2:42) and the message that unifies the church. The body of Christ is to be united around the truth that Jesus as the Christ lived a perfect life, died a sacrificial death, rose to life, ascended to heaven, and presently rules as King of a kingdom that is even now breaking into this world. Furthermore, one day, he will return to establish that kingdom in its fullness, gather his people into that kingdom, and destroy his enemies (1 Cor 15:22–28). That has always been the central confession around which all preaching, outreach, and fellowship were built. Even Peter, one of Jesus's closest disciples and a Jew who followed the law, was confronted with the radical, universal, and essential nature of this confession.

So Peter opened his mouth and said: “Truly I understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. As for the word that he sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace through Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), you yourselves know what happened throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism that John proclaimed: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power. He went about doing good and healing all who were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses of all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day and made him to appear, not to all the people but to us who had been chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one appointed by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.” (Acts 10:34–43)

Peter laid out the confession of the church in this passage. He proclaimed that God's plan is for both the Jews and the Gentiles. This plan was for God's sent Savior and Son to be crucified on a cross, raised from death, and then to appear to witnesses, who would confess that all who believe in him are

forgiven of their sins. That was Peter's confession. That was the confession of the early church. And that is our confession still today as followers of Jesus the Christ. What is our confession fundamentally? Jesus is Lord.

This is what that means:

- We confess that we cannot fulfill the requirements of the law of God.
- We confess that we are inadequate.
- We confess that we are sinful.
- We confess that we need more than self-help, moralistic teaching, or therapy.
- We confess that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah.
- We confess that this Christ is sufficient.
- We confess that this Christ is glorious.
- We confess that this Christ, the Son of God, came and lived, died and rose again, thus fulfilling the requirements of the law on our behalf and providing us with forgiveness from all our sin. He is coming again to claim his children as his own and to judge the living and the dead.
- We confess that all who place their faith in the atoning work of Jesus are redeemed and born again.

Because of what Christ has done, this confession matters for us both as individuals and as a believing community collectively. Why? It is true that because of his life, death, and resurrection we can each have a relationship with God individually. But this confession matters collectively as the people of God gather together corporately because it is only in the context of the church that the new covenant God made with us makes sense (Jer 31:31–34; 1 Cor 11:25–26; Hebrews 8).<sup>5</sup>

In fact, we are only the church as a group. You are not the church; I am not the church. The people of God meeting together, worshiping together, confessing Jesus, and reorienting our hearts toward God together are the church. We, as God's people (even more important than we as individuals), have a relationship with God. I (Jared) have heard it said that the church is the gospel

---

<sup>5</sup> The Bible consistently speaks of various covenants God has made with his people. While the majority of covenants mentioned in the Old Testament are initially addressed to an individual (such as Abraham, Moses, and David), they contain corporate promises intended for the people of God as a whole. In the midst of this Old Testament covenant context, God declared that he would establish a new covenant with his people (Jer 31:31–34). This new covenant establishes and defines the collective people of God as they live in relationship with God. For an extensive resource on the establishment of the kingdom of God through covenant, see Peter J. Gentry and Stephen J. Wellum, *Kingdom through Covenant: A Biblical-Theological Understanding of the Covenants* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018).

personified in community. In this community, all elements of his redeeming mission are seen worked out.<sup>6</sup> God relates to both individuals and people groups, but the relationship he has with his church is more vibrant and full than the relationship that any one of us individually can have with God apart from the rest of his body (see Eph 4:1–16). The apostle Peter says it this way:

As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. For it stands in Scripture:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone,  
a cornerstone chosen and precious,  
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.”

So the honor is for you who believe, but for those who do not believe,

“The stone that the builders rejected  
has become the cornerstone,”

and

“A stone of stumbling,  
and a rock of offense.”

---

<sup>6</sup> For more on the gospel personified in community and the redemption of God worked out therein, see Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family: Recapturing Jesus' Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H, 2009); and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together: The Classic Exploration of Christian Community* (New York: HarperCollins, 1954). One example of God's redemption being worked out in community that Bonhoeffer discusses is the practice of the confession of sin. He says,

In confession [of sin] there takes place a breakthrough to community. Sin wants to be alone with people. It takes them away from the community. The more lonely people become, the more destructive the power of sin over them. The more deeply they become entangled in it, the more unholy is their loneliness. Sin wants to remain unknown. It shuns the light. In the darkness of what is left unsaid sin poisons the whole being of a person. This can happen in the midst of a pious community. In confession the light of the gospel breaks into the darkness and closed isolation of the heart. Sin must be brought into the light. What is unspoken is said openly and confessed. All that is secret and hidden comes to light. It is a hard struggle until the sin crosses one's lips in confession. But God breaks down gates of bronze and cuts through bars of iron (Ps. 107:16). Since the confession of sin is made in the presence of another Christian, the last stronghold of self-justification is abandoned. The sinner surrenders, giving up all evil, giving the sinner's heart to God and finding the forgiveness of all one's sin in the community of Jesus Christ and other Christians. Sin that has been spoken and confessed has lost all of its power. It has been revealed and judged as sin. It can no longer tear apart the community. (Bonhoeffer, 112–13)

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

Beloved, I urge you as sojourners and exiles to abstain from the passions of the flesh, which wage war against your soul. (1 Pet 2:4–11)

In this passage, Peter draws from Old Testament language to present Jesus the Messiah as the living cornerstone of this new building—the new temple made of other living stones. We as members of the church are the other living stones mentioned in this passage. Notice the community-oriented language used here. As a part of this spiritual house, we together are to be a holy nation, a chosen race, a royal priesthood, and a people for God's own possession.<sup>7</sup> G. K. Beale wrote, “The very being of the church as witnesses of an invisible temple conveys the presence of God to others.”<sup>8</sup> It is in this way that we share in the presence of God with fellow believers and mediate his presence even to unbelievers. This is why there is supreme value in the corporate nature of the church of God. Our mission demands it. We must confess Christ as Lord as individuals, yes, but it becomes even more important and impactful when we confess together that King Jesus is Messiah, Lord, and Savior.

### **The Confession of the Church Defines the Church**

This confession regarding the person and work of Jesus makes and defines a Christian church. Throughout Acts (and really the whole New Testament), everything for the church flowed from and was built upon this central confession of Jesus as the Christ. All subsequent teaching, doctrine, and professed truth is tied to it and relies on it. It is fitting that the foundational truth

---

<sup>7</sup> This statement does not dismiss our individual responsibility; rather, it is intended to emphasize the communal nature of these images.

<sup>8</sup> G. K. Beale, *The Temple and the Church's Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 332.

collectively confirmed in the hearts and minds of the people of God as they gather is the truth about he who is truth: Jesus (John 14:6). When we gather as members of a local church, we are gathering around a central set of beliefs, a central and unified confession that defines us. It is not our gathering that defines us, but our belief. And it is this central confession of Christ as Savior and Lord that becomes the central focus around which all elements of the church are to be developed and taught. It is the central focus that determines the “why” and the “what” of the church’s existence.

This confession serves as an anchor, a compass, and a filter. As an anchor, this confession grounds us in the essentials. It keeps us from being distracted by secondary and tertiary issues. It hones our focus to what is most important. As a compass, this confession points us to the pivotal. It keeps us heading in the right direction. It points our sight toward that from which we must not look away. As a filter, this confession pulls out the unhelpful. It keeps our message pure. It shows us what is beneficial and what is not. Our confession that Jesus is the Christ is the central focus that defines the true Christian church.

Do not miss this point. The confession of the church defines the church. Without this confession being biblically delineated regarding the person and work of Jesus, we end up more like members of a country club centered around our consumeristic preferences, creating gods and bibles in our own image. Whether intentionally or unintentionally, we end up worshiping ourselves instead of worshiping Jesus. Instead of engaging the culture, we capitulate to it. Instead of making disciples of Jesus, we end up making disciples of ourselves. We focus on what we think and feel is important without proper consideration of the biblical imperatives concerning who Jesus is, what he has done, and who we are to be in light of those truths. We end up without the biblically designed anchor, compass, and filter.

Unfortunately, I (Adam) have seen this happen many times in many ways. Years ago, I was attending a leadership conference at a large church near Louisville, Kentucky, with a friend of mine. My friend was the manager of a Christian radio station. He had recently begun attending a church, and he was struggling with the decision. He found the church he was attending was not clear regarding its position on baptism. Specifically, as he talked to other people in the church, he found that everyone had their own view regarding the purpose of baptism, whether it was essential, whether it saved you, whether you could be baptized without claiming faith in Jesus, and so on. No one with whom he spoke saw the lack of clarity as a big deal, so I encouraged him to ask someone on staff to clarify their beliefs due to the significance of

baptism in the Bible as it relates to being a disciple of Jesus. He asked me to go with him to help him wade through any theological verbiage or implications. We approached a number of staff members, and over the course of the conversations, it became evident why people were unable to provide a clear answer to my friend's question. Their official position was personal preference, not biblical truth. Here's a summary of one of the conversations.

I asked, "Could you help answer some questions? My friend goes to church here, but is a little confused on your approach to baptism. He was wondering what the church's teaching on baptism is."

Someone responded, "Oh, we don't really focus on stuff like that."

"You don't really focus on stuff like what?" I questioned.

"We don't really focus on doctrine."

"Okay," I said, deciding to be a little more direct, "what does this church believe about baptism? Is baptism a necessary requirement for salvation, or is it an important symbol of salvation, but not a requirement?"

"Uh . . . well, see, different people on staff believe different things about that."

I pressed further. "Do you have a 'confession of faith' or 'statement of faith' that you put on the website or have posted somewhere that we could read regarding the central beliefs of this church?"

They almost laughed and looked at me sympathetically, as if I were a young child who just didn't know better. "No, that stuff just isn't important here. We just focus on worshiping God, and grace."

What could be more important than what is central in determining how to be made right with God and what determines where you spend eternity? There is a huge difference between simply trying to focus on the major issues and the response displayed by these staff members. They flippantly disregarded essential issues to which the Word of God directly speaks. We were asking about a salvation issue, about where someone spends eternity. We were asking about what makes someone a Christian. Whether or not baptism is required for salvation is an important question.<sup>9</sup> This church had about 6,000 people who attended every weekend, yet something was seriously wrong. The staff valued numbers and ensuring everyone was emotionally comfortable over clarity and truth.

The question is, What God are we worshiping? If a church is worshiping the God of the Bible, then the entirety of God's self-revelation determines

---

<sup>9</sup> While baptism is incredibly important, the New Testament demonstrates that baptism is a public sign of the forgiveness of sins found through faith in Jesus Christ. See the discussion on pages 21–22.

who he is in our minds. Notice the staff member's emphasis on grace. Always focusing on only one aspect of God's character or attributes (in this case grace) while ignoring all others (such as justice) is not the worship of the one true God; it is the worship of an idol fashioned into what we want God to be. Another concern is, who determines what grace is and how it is applied? It seemed in this church, the listener makes that determination, and not any outside source or authority. The consumer decides. This is not worshipping Jesus the Christ, who is "the way, and the truth, and the life" (John 14:6). This is erecting a god made in our own image, just like the golden calf at the bottom of Mount Sinai (Exodus 32). While this church would publicly say that they believe Jesus is Lord, in reality, everything they did and planned to do was geared toward getting people in the building and making them feel comfortable. The church was not collectively seeking what Jesus wanted. They were not corporately acknowledging and surrendering to him as the Messiah. Their real confession was this: self is supreme.

### **Consumer-Centered or Christ-Centered Confession?**

This perspective is nowhere near that of the early church, where the whole body and each individual member "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching" (Acts 2:42). And what was it that the apostles were teaching? If we back up to the beginning of Acts, we find the answer. In chapter 1, Luke described Jesus's ascension into heaven and his last command to his followers. Jesus's followers were ready for him to establish his kingdom. They questioned, "Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?" (v. 6). They wanted to know when the kingdom would come, but Jesus was not interested in answering that question. Instead of focusing on when the kingdom would come in its fullness, Jesus focused them on their work, which was filling the kingdom. "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority," he said. "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and *you will be my witnesses* in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:7–8). These early followers of Jesus were told that the Spirit would empower them to be his witnesses. Being a witness for Jesus meant they would serve Jesus's purposes, but it also meant that they would testify to others concerning who Jesus is: the Messiah. The use of the word "witnesses" shows that Jesus expected his followers to confess his person and work to others.

In the next chapter in Acts, at the first public gathering of people with

the apostles, we see Peter standing up and teaching from the Old Testament that Jesus is the messianic Lord who saves all who believe in him (Acts 2:14–40). Throughout his sermon, he gave personal testimony of the nature of Jesus’s death and resurrection and challenged everyone present to “repent and be baptized . . . in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins” (Acts 2:38). The early church continually feasted on this truth regarding the person and work of Jesus. It was at the heart of all they did, and they devoted themselves to the reality that Jesus is the Christ.

The confession that Jesus is the Christ is the constant refrain of Scripture. Instead of “self-as-Lord,” Scripture screams, “Jesus is Lord.” We see this tradition of confession continuing in what Paul wrote to Timothy:

Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness:

[Jesus] was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated by the Spirit,  
seen by angels,  
proclaimed among the nations,  
believed on in the world,  
taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)

This verse is a shorthand confession of who Jesus is and what he has done. In fact, this verse is believed to be part of an early church hymn.<sup>10</sup> Early Christians used this shorthand confession of Jesus to worship and to share with others about him. This confession defined their life, worship, and evangelism.

The confession of Jesus as Lord is central. Paul, in the midst of his discussion on the place of Jews in the plan of God, explained why.

For Moses writes about the righteousness that is based on the law: that the person who does the commandments shall live by them. But the righteousness based on faith says, “Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’” (that is, to bring Christ down) “or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’” (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? “The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart” (that is, the word of faith that we proclaim); because, if you

---

<sup>10</sup> Thomas D. Lea and Hayne P. Griffin Jr., *1, 2 Timothy and Titus*, New American Commentary 34 (Nashville: B&H, 1992), 124.

confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved. For the Scripture says, “Everyone who believes in him will not be put to shame.” For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, bestowing his riches on all who call on him. For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” (Rom 10:5–13)

Paul is here starkly contrasting “righteousness that is based on the law” with “righteousness based on faith.” Where righteousness based on the law is concerned primarily with doing the commandments and living by them, righteousness based on faith is concerned primarily with the word of faith we proclaim. In other words, confessing who Jesus is and how his work affects who we are is the way we exercise faith. This passage reveals that to be “saved” is to confess him with your mouth and to believe in him in your heart. Paul pointed to the reality that it is through this confession one experiences salvation: whether Jew or Gentile. Salvation comes through faith in Jesus, exercised in verbal confession and belief. Thus, once more, Jesus, not self, is Lord. The way to life in Jesus is loving, trusting, believing in, and confessing him.

In his book *Desiring the Kingdom*, James K. A. Smith discusses how all cultural institutions (even secular ones, such as the mall, the stadium, and the academy) seek to form their participants in certain ways. The first major exercise in the book is to show that secular institutions are, in fact, centers of formation that target the heart and not the mind. One of Smith’s most poignant examples is a shopping mall. The mall wants to form each consumer to be a certain kind of person: one that desires the products it sells. Smith then described the purchasing of items at a register as the “consummation of our worship.” A “priest” invites us to give and to take, to taste and see with something concrete that the promises of the good life are true. We “make our sacrifice, leave our donation, but in return receive something with solidity that is wrapped in the colors and symbols of the saints and the season.”<sup>11</sup> The reason Smith discussed the mall in such religious and ritual terms is to show that as an institution it is forming our hearts to love a certain vision of the good life. He continued:

---

<sup>11</sup> James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2009), 22.

Because our hearts are oriented primarily by desire, by what we love, and because those desires are shaped and molded by the habit-forming practices in which we participate, it is the rituals and practices of the mall—the liturgies of mall and market—that shape our imaginations and how we orient ourselves to the world. Embedded in them is a common set of assumptions about the shape of human flourishing, which becomes an implicit *telos*, or goal, of our own desires and actions. That is, the visions of the good life embedded in these practices become surreptitiously embedded in us through our participation in the rituals and rhythms of these institutions.<sup>12</sup>

Once again, the real confession of the liturgy of the mall is “Self is supreme.”

Throughout his book, Smith asserts that our churches need to be centers of counter-formation, shaping participants into the kind of people who love Jesus and desire his kingdom. We need to be involved in individual and corporate liturgy,<sup>13</sup> holding fast to what the biblically defined church is and does. By doing this, our churches can effectively undo the formation toward consumerism and reform our desires toward loving Jesus as the Christ and his vision of the good life (see John 10:10).

After all, the way to life in Jesus is not knowing more; it is desiring, loving, and trusting him. However, without a central confession, we are left with a million self-confessions that are based on our preferences and cultural values and not on God. More often than not, the church has imported cultural values and strategies from the world (such as consumerism from the mall, nationalism from the stadium, or rationalism from the university) and baptized them.<sup>14</sup> This worldly approach does not lead to the glorification of King Jesus, but ultimately only of oneself.

### Where Does This Confession Start?

I (Adam) have taught for years at a Christian university. Some of my classes are online. A few years ago, I was grading some discussion board posts. Discussion

---

<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, 25.

<sup>13</sup> Do not be thrown off by this strange-sounding “High Church” word. Think: worship. *Liturgy* simply refers to “the physical acts of public worship.” Smith’s *Desiring the Kingdom* is the first in a series titled *Cultural Liturgies*, so this kind of language is built into Smith’s argument.

<sup>14</sup> This project of identifying and connecting various cultural values with their quintessential cultural institutions is also from Smith. See in particular chapter 3.

boards allow online students to interact with one another by providing feedback on each other's ideas to produce community, accountability, and collaboration. One student was discussing a recent experience had at a church service. The student wrote, "The pastor preached about repentance, and I didn't like it. What about grace?" Do not miss the subjectivity. Did you notice that this student's starting point for truth was self-preference? What about the Bible? What about how God has chosen to reveal himself through his Son and in his Word? Repentance is an essential part of our relationship with God (Acts 20:21). This student was choosing to define God and how God acts toward us by how the student wanted him to be, not by how God has revealed himself.

Think about this: If you and I were walking down the street, came upon a random person, and I asked you to introduce him to me, you would look at me as if I were crazy. You could not introduce us, and I would have no basis for that expectation. Why? Because you do not know that person. You could make something up. You could develop an elaborate backstory, but it would be false. To accurately describe someone, one first has to get information from that individual, the source. You have to know him to describe him. Even if someone else tells you about a person, you need to confirm it with the person himself to make sure it is true. In the same way, for us to be confident in who God is, we need his self-description. Let me be clear: we are not in the dark concerning who God is and what he ultimately desires. He has revealed himself to us. He has given us a wealth of information about how he works. He has revealed himself in Jesus, given us the Bible, and even given us his Spirit. We have received this information from him, and thus we can know him.

What we are to have as central in our confession and what we are to rally our lives around is not self; it is the identity of Jesus as Christ the Messiah. This truth is revealed time and time again in the Scriptures. The central confession of our lives is that Jesus is the Son of God, who came and lived, died, and rose again, fulfilling the requirements of the law on our behalf and providing us with forgiveness of all our sin. In his time, he will return to judge all of humanity and to separate his own, forgiven children from those who are not forgiven. For us to receive forgiveness of sins, we need to repent of our sins, believe this good news, and make it the central confession of our lives and our corporate gatherings.

At this point, you may be asking, "How does the church confess Jesus? How does it communicate that Jesus is the Messiah and Lord? Are we saying that to confess is simply to say that Jesus is Lord? Are we saying that the church congregation must verbalize together that the Messiah has come?"

Not exactly, though those things are surely good and right to do. There are three primary ways that the church historically and biblically has revealed Jesus as Lord: through the preaching of the Word of God, through water baptism, and through the Lord's Supper. By these three avenues, Jesus is proclaimed in biblical, gospel-believing churches. They collectively show who Jesus is to the watching world, but much more importantly and centrally, it is through these avenues that we as a body affirm the truth and remind one another of the central truths of Jesus's identity.

Surely the clearest of the three, in biblical preaching the truth of the identity of Jesus is proclaimed. The text of Scripture points to Jesus on every page, if not in word, then certainly in idea and end goal. Timothy Keller has said, "Every time you expound a Bible text, you are not finished unless you demonstrate how it shows us that we cannot save ourselves and that only Jesus can."<sup>15</sup> This is the point and goal of preaching: to confess Christ as Lord. Keller goes on to say, "This is how to deliver not just an informative lecture but a life-changing sermon. It is not merely to talk about Christ but to show him, to 'demonstrate' [see 1 Cor 2:4] his greatness and to reveal him as worthy of praise and adoration."<sup>16</sup>

Confession (like preaching) is more than speaking of Christ (though it is not less), and the other two primary ways that the church confesses Jesus is Lord are much more about showing. In fact, both baptism and the Lord's Supper are acts performed by the members of the church to show and remind one another of who Jesus is and what he has done. Baptism, in particular, is a "show-and-tell" situation. First, when the candidate is asked, "What is your confession of faith?" (in other words, "Who is Jesus to you?"), the expected response is that Jesus is the person's Lord and Savior, the Messiah of the whole world, and that it is in him and him alone that the candidate is trusting for salvation. This verbal confession is made publicly and purposefully. This public confession (alongside good works) is to serve as evidence of conversion. It is then followed by a physical act, a bodily confession, if you will. The person is lowered into the water, which symbolizes the reality of our spiritual death before being cleansed by Jesus. He or she is then raised up and out of the water as a symbol of resurrection and new life. The act of baptism proclaims that Jesus is the Messiah, the one who is making all things—in this case the person's individual life—new. This is the example set by the early church:

---

<sup>15</sup> Timothy Keller, *Preaching: Communicating Faith in an Age of Skepticism* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 48.

<sup>16</sup> Keller, 17–18.

But when they believed Philip as he proclaimed the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptized, both men and women. (Acts 8:12)

Crispus, the synagogue leader, and his entire household believed in the Lord; and many of the Corinthians who heard Paul believed and were baptized. (Acts 18:8)<sup>17</sup>

Finally, the ordinance of the Lord's Supper is also an avenue of confession for the church. The origin of the Lord's Supper is recorded in Matthew 26. This passage recounts the scene as Jesus shared the Passover meal with his disciples right before he was to be betrayed and crucified: "Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, 'Take, eat; this is my body.' And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (vv. 26–28). Here Jesus adds to the traditional Passover meal. He expects that his Jewish followers will continue to observe Passover, and he tells them to remember his death, as their King and Messiah, for their sins at this moment in the Passover meal. The majority of those reading this book are probably not Jewish and, thus, do not observe Passover; however, Christian churches continue this tradition that Jesus began of remembering his death with bread and wine. Looking back, we proclaim to one another with a meal that Jesus died for our sins, that his body was broken and his blood spilled. We further proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah and look forward to the day when we will share a meal together with the global church, celebrating the final consummation of the kingdom of God.

### **Many Churches, One Confession**

There are many differing Christian denominations in our modern context. From Baptist and Presbyterian to Wesleyan and Charismatic/Pentecostal

---

<sup>17</sup> See also Acts 8:36–38; 10:47–48; 16:14–15; 16:31–33. Some argue that infants would have been a part of some of these "household" baptisms. That argument from silence is used as a justification for infant baptism without a confession of faith; however, that is an assumption. Nowhere in the text are infants mentioned, and the consistent pattern throughout the Gospels and Acts is that someone responds positively to the good news about Jesus and then is baptized. Thus, we are advocating for a "believer's" baptism, since that seems to be the model set for us by the early church.

churches, many differences exist when it comes to church government, leadership structure, evangelistic zeal, discipleship practices, worship liturgy, Communion, sanctification, the order of salvation, and free will. In the midst of all these differences, what makes any gathering, regardless of the denomination (or lack thereof), a Christian church? Is it meeting together? Is it shared worship of the King? Partly, but foundationally, the central element that marks a Christian church gathering is its confession of Jesus as Lord.

What we confess as *a church* determines whether or not we are a part of *the church*, that is, the global or universal church. Let us step back for a moment and flesh this out a little more.

In the original language of the New Testament, Greek, the word from which we get our English word *church* is *ekklesia* (ἐκκλησία). This Greek word was not originally a religious term; typically, it referred to a purposefully gathered assembly of people. The New Testament Christians appropriated this political word for their own gatherings because they too were purposefully gathering as a people.

There seem to be two basic ways this word is used in the Bible. It is used of both a local gathering of Christians and the total collection of all Christians. This is why we can speak of *the church* and *a church* and mean different things. A representative example of the local use of *ekklesia* is found in Acts 8:1: “And there arose on that day a great persecution against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.” This passage describes a situation in the life of a local church in a single city. On the other hand, a representative example of the global use of *ekklesia* is found in Matt 16:18: “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Here Jesus is saying that he will build his church on Peter’s confession of him as Lord. This is a reference not to a particular congregation, but to all those who will be a part of the body of Christ.

The chapters of this book refer primarily to characteristics of local churches. Our local churches are to be confessing, gathering, praying, giving, and engaging bodies. While it is true that the universal church should be a praying, giving, and engaging church, the universal church is not, as a whole, a gathering church. Local congregations are the way the church gathers.

Another way to think about it is like this: A *local* church is a congregation that gathers together, confesses Jesus as Lord (through preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper), prays, engages, and gives wherever that body is in the world. All local churches are committed to the same mission: preaching the gospel and

confessing Jesus. All of these local churches all over the world, united by gospel mission and discipleship, then make up the *global* church. There can be a distinct difference between saying one is part of *the* church and saying one belongs to *a* church. Notice how this has been defined lest there be any misunderstanding: one cannot be recognized as a member of *the* church unless one is a part of a local church. Why? The sum total of the local churches, or congregations, in the kingdom of God make up the church global. That does not necessarily mean that if someone is not a member of a local church, he or she is not saved. Rather, these statements reflect the reality that throughout the history of the church, and as evidenced in Acts, one was identified with the church of Jesus by being an active part of a local church. Make no mistake: there are many expressions of the local church, from the modern, Western megachurch to the house church, but the universal church of God is a community experience, whatever that community looks like. What we confess as a local church about Jesus our Lord determines whether or not we are a part of the global church.

Central to this confession is that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. Our confession of faith in Jesus is that which we hold forth for all to see, that which we unite around, and that which we proclaim centrally in all that we do! The apostle Paul proclaimed in Romans 10, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved” (vv. 9–10). This confession is essential for salvation, should be central to our lives, and must be central to our worship.

Many of today’s “Christian” churches seem to have an awful lot of confessions that have very little to do with Christ as Lord. When we are honest, in any church where Jesus as the Christ is not the central confession, what is put on their signs, the slogans slapped on their websites, the songs that are sung, the “pop psychology” that is preached, and the programming that is provided is all unintentionally geared to promote the worship, not of King Jesus, but of self.

Let us pause and reflect. We must be careful not to assume too much, but to genuinely question ourselves and our worship gatherings. Are we defined by an unapologetic, age-old pronouncement that Jesus is the Savior of the world? Are our church gatherings? Are we defined by a gospel of self or the gospel of King Jesus?

Just as I (Adam) am still defined by my confession to Adrienne when I was eighteen that I loved her and wanted her to be my wife, so too our churches individually and corporately must be defined by the confession that we love Jesus, and that he is our Lord and Savior. Just as the confession of my love for

my future wife came over time and grew in depth, so too should our confession of Christ. It should grow and not be stagnant. It is not a onetime confession, but a persistent conviction. Just as my confession to Adrienne was a confession not only of words, but of practices, so too our confession of Jesus should be transformative for our lives. My confession to Adrienne was the root that fed what I did in our relationship. So too must our love for Christ. My prayer for you is that you are realizing a new depth to this confession today. May our confession provide the lifeblood for all that we do.

### Final Thoughts

How would our approach to “church” be different if this confession of Jesus as Lord drove our thoughts and actions? For anyone currently looking for a church, this confession should be your preeminent consideration regarding a church. A gospel-centric confession must be the number-one priority when joining the membership of a local body of believers. One should determine if this local church publicly cherishes and confesses Christ as central to all it does, not merely as a creative slogan or mission statement, but as the true foundation and only solid rock. Remember the avenues of confession we discussed, and find a church that values biblical preaching, baptism, and the Lord’s Supper not for their own sake, but as ways to point to Jesus.<sup>18</sup> Resist the urge to look for a church to meet your consumeristic needs and programming styles, but search diligently to find a church that makes much of Jesus. Find one in which you can contribute to the body with the gifts that Jesus has given you by means of the indwelling work of his Spirit (see Rom 12:3–21; 1 Cor 12:1–31; Eph 4:1–16). We as the body of Christ are called to unite around the confession that Jesus is the Messiah just as the early church did. It should be the center of our preaching and teaching. It should direct our conversations and encouragement. It should drive our passion for the church to confess and worship anew the risen Christ when we meet together. It should shape our lives during the week.

Ask yourself, “What is my central confession? What do I believe wholeheartedly?” Is central in your confession of faith the conviction that Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah? Do you believe that this Christ, the Son of God, came to earth and lived, died, and rose again, fulfilling the requirements of

---

<sup>18</sup> If you think that you need a little more help with what to look for in a church, keep reading! There are more characteristics to be discussed. We would also encourage you to check out Mark Dever, *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013).

the law on our behalf and providing us with forgiveness from all our sin? Maybe you realize today that this *is* your confession, and you are willing to submit every aspect of your life to Jesus Christ. Or maybe there is one aspect of life that you have been withholding from his will. Confess today and turn that over to him. Maybe you suddenly realize the need to take seriously all the teachings of Christ, and you recognize that you have never made a confession publicly and been baptized as a believer. I encourage you to contact your pastor and move forward with this next phase of spiritual life. If you are not a member of a church, I want to encourage you to join a healthy, Bible-believing, Christ-exalting church such as we discussed a moment ago.

Maybe you are firmer in your belief today than you have ever been. If so, stand firm in that confession and ask God to root you deeply in it and not allow anything this world throws at you to move you. Ask him to give you more confidence in Christ and more joy in him than you have ever had.

Let us commit to follow the example of the early church. Just as the confession that Jesus is the Christ served as central to all they did and believed, may it be the same for us, both individually as believers and corporately as a church. May we, together with the apostle Paul, confess:

Great indeed . . . is the mystery of godliness:

[Jesus] was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated by the Spirit,  
seen by angels,  
proclaimed among the nations,  
believed on in the world,  
taken up in glory. (1 Tim 3:16)

## Personal Reflection or Group Discussion Questions

---

1. Before reading this chapter, would you have been able to define the confession of the church? If not, what would your definition have been and how has a greater understanding of the biblical confession of the church already shifted your answer?
2. Have you ever felt alone or without community? If so, how is the gospel of who Jesus is and what he has done good news to the lonely or marginalized? And how is this good news to you at this moment?
3. Do you confess the Messiah Jesus as Lord? If not, what fear or doubt is holding you back? If so, is there still some element of your life that you are reluctant to submit completely to Jesus's reign? Are you willing to take the next step and surrender that thing to Jesus's will today?
4. How involved are you in your local church? What does this show about your priorities? What in your current cultural setting is forming your love and desire for things other than God? Are you engaged in corporate practices that can reorient your heart toward God? Are you engaged in individual disciplines that can reorient your heart toward God? Do you spend enough time in community with other believers to counter the formation of the worldly culture?
5. Is your confession of Jesus defined by God's self-revelation in Scripture? When you think of who Jesus is, does your mind go to passages of the Bible? If not, what does define your understanding of Jesus? How can you effectively change your mental image of Jesus to be more biblical?
6. How do you currently invite others to your local church? How do you describe it to them? What do you focus on? Are you more concerned with the quality of the teaching and corporate confessions or more excited about the programs and the popularity of the preacher?

## Devotional

---

### *Day One: Acts 10:34–43*

Have you ever been hesitant to confess something you believe or know to be true?

Open your Bible and read Acts 10:34–43.

In this passage, Peter confesses what he knows to be true about Jesus. This confession put him at odds with the Jewish leaders and much of the Jewish people.

Think deeply about the following questions:

What stands out to you about Peter's confession? What elements are featured prominently in it?

Why is it significant that he points out that we have been commanded to preach and to testify about who Jesus is?

How did Peter have the courage to proclaim and confess with boldness that Jesus is the Christ? Do you have this same courage? If not, what is holding you back from this type of radical obedience?

Reflect on the fact that you too can be empowered by the Holy Spirit to confess that Jesus is Messiah and Lord, even in a crowd like the one Peter addressed. What does it mean that you can also be empowered by the Holy Spirit to make this confession? What might that look like?

How can you prepare to confess Jesus as Lord this week? What does this look like in your workplace? At home? With friends?