



FRESNO PACIFIC
UNIVERSITY

FPUScholarWorks

The politics of confession.

Author(s): Toews, John E.

Source: *Direction*, vol 38, no. 1 (2009): 5-16.

Published by: Direction.

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/11418/449>

FPUScholarWorks is an online repository for creative and scholarly works and other resources created by members of the [Fresno Pacific University](#) community. FPUScholarWorks makes these resources freely available on the web and assures their preservation for the future.

The Politics of Confession

John E. Toews

We make confessions regularly—in churches and in our personal conversations. “Jesus is Lord” or “Jesus is my savior” is a theological confession which says something about our Christian commitment. In many churches we recite the confessions of the church as a regular part of the worship service, either the Apostles Creed or the Nicene Creed—“I believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and hearth; and in Jesus Christ, His Son, Our Lord . . .” We believe that with these confessional recitations we are making clear and simple theological statements about what is core Christian faith. We do not think about these confessions as simultaneously political statements. Our personal and corporate confessions of faith are not viewed by most of us as standing over against something.

*The confession of Jesus as Lord calls us to a new allegiance
that we need to express in public and political ways*

My thesis in this article is a very simple one. The confessions of the earliest church were simultaneously theological and political statements. The earliest confessions of the faith stood over against something. To confess Jesus as Lord or Savior was to boldly assert that someone else was not Lord and Savior. Specifically, the early Christian confessions stood over against the Roman emperor and the Roman Empire. To confess that Jesus is Lord was not only to say something about Jesus but also about the emperor; it was declaration that Caesar Augustus was not Lord. The earliest confessions of faith were also confessions of political allegiance.

My evidence for such a claim is the earliest confessions that we have, all confessions cited by the earliest writer of documents we have in our New Testament. The Apostle Paul cites a series of confessions in different letters that help us understand the function of confessions of faith. These

John E. Toews is the former President of Conrad Grebel University College, Waterloo, Ontario, as well as the Academic Dean and Professor Emeritus of the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, Fresno, California.

confessions were all written in the decades of the 50's and 60's of the first century, about twenty-five to thirty-five years after the death and resurrection of Christ. Many scholars believe that these confessions are citations in one form or another of confessions that were composed and recited earlier in the life of the church; they have a poetic/rhythmical quality that distinguishes them from the prose context in which we now find them.

1 CORINTHIANS 8:6

One of the earliest confessions of faith in Paul's letters is found in 1 Corinthians 8:6:

there is one God, the father,
 out of whom all things
 and for whom we exist,
 and there is one Lord, Messiah Jesus,
 through whom all things
 and through whom we exist.

The literary context for this confession is a very practical one concerning the question of eating meat originally sacrificed in a pagan temple, often a temple of the imperial cult as part of the worship of the Roman emperor. The meat that was not burned in the sacrifice or eaten by the priests was eaten in banquets in the temple or put on sale in the market. Could the disciples of Jesus eat this meat at temple banquets or buy this meat for personal consumption? Some people in the Corinthian house churches claimed they could eat and buy such meat. Their rationale was a theological one: they know that idols do not have any real existence and they confess that "there is no God but one" (8:4). Paul responds to this Corinthian theology by initially agreeing: there may be so-called gods in heaven and on earth, as indeed there are many "gods" and "lords" (8:5). Most scholars agree that Paul is making a critical distinction between "gods" in the heavens—stars, sun, fire, wind, sea, all of which were divinized in the ancient world—and rulers/lords on earth, specifically the Roman emperors like Julius Caesar and Caesar Augustus.

But Paul immediately qualifies, even undermines, the theological rationale of the Corinthian disciples. It is true that there are many gods and lords in the very pluralistic city of Corinth, he acknowledges. But that is not true for followers of Jesus. Over against the "many gods and many lords" there is one God and one Lord. The disciples of Jesus, Paul says, confess the Jewish *shema* (Deut. 6:4)—the Lord our God, the Lord is One—expanded by an explanatory phrase on God and another on "Lord." God is the Father, from whom are all things and we through him. Lord is Messiah Jesus,

through whom are all things and we through him. Paul's commentary on the shema represents a radical interpretive move. First, Paul has placed Jesus within the best known monotheistic text of the Hebrew scriptures, within the doctrine of Israel's God as the one and only God, the creator of the cosmos. Paul has articulated a Christological monotheism. Paul is essentially saying that if your monotheism, which now includes Jesus is correct, you will be able to answer the question of eating meat offered to idols. Second, Paul directly and unequivocally challenges the "lordship" of Caesar by the confession that there is only one Lord, Messiah Jesus. Roman imperial ideology proclaimed many gods but one lord, Caesar Augustus. Paul counters that the very practical question of eating meat offered to idols must be answered by the confession that there is only one God and only one Lord. That one Lord is Messiah Jesus, not the Roman emperor (see Wright 1991, 120ff; Denaux, 593ff; and Hoppe, 28ff, for a more detailed discussion of Paul's interpretation of the shema).

Paul's confession is simultaneously a theological and a political assertion. It denies the many gods in the many temples of Corinth and it denies the lordship of Caesar Augustus in a Roman colony that is devoted to the worship of the emperor in the imperial cult. Paul's theological confession is politically subversive. It contradicts the central conviction and practice of the Roman religious-political order.

The socio-political context for this subversive claim is found within a relatively new city. The old city of Corinth was destroyed by the Romans in 146 BCE. One hundred years later, shortly before his death in 44 BCE, Julius Caesar founded a new city at Corinth as a Roman colony. As a Roman colony Corinth was a mini-Rome which mirrored the religious institutions and practices of Rome more closely than any other setting outside of Rome itself. We have substantial evidence—temples, altars, inscriptions, statues, portraits, epigraphical references—for the centrality and significance of the imperial cult in Corinth, most centered in the forum at the heart of the city. Ceremonies and sacrifices to the emperor were performed at the same time and in the same way as in Rome. The eating of the sacrifices, that is, communal meals, were practised in Corinth just as in Rome (see Beard and North, Engels, Hoskins Walbank, Schowalter, and Friesen for more details and analysis).

Paul's confession plus his assertion that it is impossible to participate in the politics of the sacrifices and to share in the body and blood of Christ while also participating in the food offered to other gods and lords (10:14–22) means that followers of Jesus are to exclude themselves from the most fundamental form of sociopolitical relations in Corinthian and Roman imperial society, the sacrifice to and worship of the Roman emperor. The rejection of imperial sacrifices and the refusal to eat meat offered in these

sacrifices were both anti-imperial stances.

The theological confession that Jesus is Lord is a theo-political confession. It makes a theological statement that is at the same time a political statement. And the political component of the statement defines the followers of Jesus as people who do not participate in the most fundamental practices of civic religion and political loyalty.

ROMANS 1:3–4 AND 15:12

A few years after writing the first letter to the Corinthians Paul from the city of Corinth writes a letter to the house churches in the city of Rome, the capital of the Roman empire. The center of the city had numerous temples to pagan gods and to the emperors of Rome. Every city block had an altar to the emperor at which people were expected to make confession or offer sacrifices. Every home was expected to have a cove with an image of the emperor.

With unbelievable boldness Paul confesses Jesus as Messiah and Lord at the beginning and end of the letter in terms that challenge the dominant politics of Rome and the Roman emperor. Paul asserts that the good news he proclaims is “the good news of God” and that it concerns “God’s Son” who has “descended from David . . . the one having been appointed son of God . . . Messiah Jesus our Lord” (Rom. 1:3–4). Paul concludes the letter by saying that Messiah Jesus “will ‘rule the nations’” and is the center of hope for the nations (15:12). Son of God and Lord are both titles for the Roman emperor who alone is understood to rule the nations and to be the hope for the nations.

Paul follows this confession with greetings for his readers “from God our father and the Lord Messiah Jesus” (Rom. 1:7). His mission in the letter he says is “to preach the good news [gospel], and that “he is not ashamed of the good news because it is the power of God to salvation to all the faithful ones, Jews first and also Gentiles, because the end-time, world transforming righteousness of God is revealed in it from faithfulness to faithfulness. . .” (1:16–17) (see Toews 2004, 50–60 for the exegesis behind this translation). A Jewish scholar, the late Jacob Taubes, calls these “fighting words,” a declaration of an intifada against Caesar and Roman imperial power and religion. It is “a political declaration of war on Caesar” (Taubes, 16).

Paul’s opening and concluding confessions in Romans are theological statements; he confesses that Jesus is the messianic fulfillment of the promises to David and the Jewish people. But every word in these confessions and in Paul’s opening statement of his mission to the capital of the empire also are loaded with political meaning—gospel, son of God, Lord, rule the nations, hope for the nations, faith, father, salvation, righteousness are all

understood in Rome as referents to Augustus, the emperor. The emperor is the son of God, lord, and father of the Roman people who rules the nations, who brings hope, salvation, and righteousness to all peoples of the world.

The confessions of Paul in Romans are theo-political assertions. They simultaneously outline Paul's understanding of the gospel and his counter-imperial claims about the politics of the gospel. Paul challenges what the people of Rome say about the Roman emperor. The Romans got it wrong, Paul says. Messiah Jesus is the son of God, the Lord, who brings hope, salvation and righteousness to all people and who will rule the nations in behalf of God the father (for an elaboration of this interpretation of Romans, see Toews 2009).

PHILIPPIANS 2:5–11

Sometime after the writing of Romans, Paul also wrote a letter to the churches in Philippi. A relatively small town of about 15,000 people, the city was famous because of its association with two history changing Roman battles, the Battle of Philippi in 42 BCE when Anthony and Octavian defeated Brutus and Cassius, the assassins of Julius Caesar, and the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE when Octavian defeated Anthony to become the sole emperor of the Roman Empire. Philippi was made a Roman colony, like Corinth, after the first battle and settled with soldiers from the Roman army. Octavian settled more soldiers in Philippi after the battle of Actium and declared Philippi a *ius Italicum*, which meant it was governed by Roman law and its citizens were given Roman citizenship. Philippi even more than Corinth was a mini-Rome (see Bakirtzis and Koester, 5ff; and Abrahamson, 7ff).

The forum near the center of the city had two temples to the imperial cult, one to Augustus and a second to his wife Livia. In addition to the cults of Augustus and Livia, there also were imperial cults to Augustus' adopted sons, Gaius and Lucius Caesar, and the Emperor Claudius, the emperor just before Paul visited the city for the first time. The worship of the Roman emperor was a dominant feature in the religion and culture of Philippi.

Paul writes the letter of Philippians to house churches that are suffering oppression, including persecution, from the dominant culture. One consequence of this persecution is that divisions have developed in the churches. People are putting self-interest above the welfare of others. Paul writes a letter to encourage unity in the churches. He cites or writes an early Christian confession as the prime example of the kind of behavior people should practice to maintain the unity of the church in these difficult times. The confession, translated very literally is:

who in the form of God existing
not took advantage of

being equal with God (*isa theo*)
 but emptied himself
 taking the form of a slave
 being born like other human beings
 being found in the form of a human being
 he humbled himself
 becoming obedient to the point of death
 even death on a cross

 therefore, also God
 highly exalted him
 and graciously gave him the name
 the name above every name
 in order that in honor of Jesus' name
 every knee shall bow
 all beings in heaven, and on earth and in the world be-
 low
 and every tongue shall confess
 that Jesus Messiah is Lord
 to the glory of the Father (2:5–11 — Hooker structure).

We are so familiar with the confession that its radical challenge to Roman imperial ideology eludes us. The underlined phrases make claims for Jesus that directly challenge the theology of Rome about the emperor. Equality with the gods, *isa theo*, was an honorific title of the Roman emperor. Of all humans he alone had the “form of god” and was equal with the gods. Many scholars have argued that the contrast in vv. 6–7 is between Adam who sought to be like God and Jesus “who humbled himself, taking the form of a servant.” A more likely comparison is between the Roman emperor who claimed to be equal with the gods and Jesus “who humbled himself, taking the form of a servant.” Jesus, the confession asserts, was granted equality with God in response to his life of humility, service and obedience. As such it challenges the deeply embedded honor code of Roman imperial ideology.

A key component of Roman imperial ideology in the worship of the imperial cult is that the Roman emperor is enthroned. He is celebrated in public religious-political ceremonies and pictured in statues and on coins as seated on a throne just below the high god (Zeus/Jupiter) and high above all other creatures in the universe. Beginning with the emperor Gaius in 37 CE, about fifteen to twenty years before Paul quotes the Philippian confession, people who appeared before the enthroned emperor bowed down, bent the knee, in honor of the emperor. To picture Jesus as exalted or en-

throned with every knee in the cosmos (heaven, earth, the world below) bowing to him is a direct challenge to the Roman emperor and to the whole worldview of the Roman Empire.

The foundational confession, religious and political, of the Roman Empire is that Caesar is Lord. All people in the Empire are expected to proclaim/confess that Caesar is Lord. World order and peace is dependent on this confession. To refuse to make this confession is to be guilty of treason. To confess that “every tongue shall confess that Jesus Messiah is Lord” means that Caesar is not Lord and thus to be guilty of high treason.

The Philippian confession of faith is a deeply theological confession; it makes powerful claims for Jesus. At the same time it is a profoundly political confession that challenges the core of the Roman imperial worldview. The one who is equal with God is Jesus, not Caesar, the one who is enthroned high above the world is Jesus, not Caesar, the one before whom all creatures prostrate themselves is Jesus, not Caesar, the Lord confessed by every tongue is Jesus, not Caesar. As Tom Wright says “this is fighting talk, the sort of thing that gets you in trouble with the authorities” (Wright 1990, 14).

The Philippian confession is so subversive because it protests against the construction of social-political-religious reality symbolized and embodied in the imperial cult. The equilibrium of the empire, the peace with the gods, the well-being of the world is inverted by the confession of Jesus as Lord. An alternative worldview is articulated that challenges the public construction of power and peace in the world. The new and the real politics is a citizenship of a different kingdom whose savior (another title of the Roman emperor) is awaited. This savior, the Lord Messiah Jesus, will be powerful enough to subject all things to himself (3:20–21). The Empire and the emperor are turned on their head by the Philippian confession. It is hard to imagine a more political presentation of Jesus and the gospel. Almost all citizens of the Roman empire would have heard the confession as a counter theology to the pervasive imperial ideology.

COLOSSIANS 1:15–20

Paul wrote another letter in the same general time frame as Philippians to a set of churches in south-central Asia Minor (modern Turkey). The purpose of the letter was to counteract a teaching in these churches which minimized the full significance of Jesus Christ. Early in the letter Paul cites a hymn or confession in praise of Christ:

who is the image
of God, the invisible
firstborn of all creation

because in him all things were created
 in the heavens and upon the earth
 visible and invisible
 whether thrones or lordships
 or rulers or powers
 all things through him and to him were created
 and he is before all
 and all things in him are held together

and he is the head
of the body of the church

who is the beginning
 firstborn from the dead ones
 so that he might become in all things himself pre-eminent
 because in him was pleased
 all the fulness to dwell
 and through him to reconcile all things to him
making peace by the blood of his cross [through him]
 whether things on the earth or things in the heavens
 (Wright 1991).

Paul cites the hymn to assert that Christ is sufficient for all the needs of the Christians in Colossae. In the process of making that theological confession he uses a whole series of titles and words that are used to describe the person and the role of the Roman emperor:

image of God (*eikon tou theou*)
 first, pre-eminent (*protokos*)
 throne (*thonos*)
 powers (*exousia*)
 dominion, rulership (*kuriotes*)
 rulership, sovereignty (*arxe*)
 head of the body (*kephale tou somatos*)
 fulness, completeness (*pleroma*)
 reconcile (*allasso*)
 make peace (*eirenopoiew*).

In 2:9–15 Paul adds to these three other phrases used to describe the emperor: fulness of deity dwells (*to pleroma tes theotestos somatikos*), in him we are fulfilled (*este en auto pepleromenoi*), who is the head of all rule and authority (*hos kephale pases arxes kai exousias*).

The Colossian hymn does two startling things. First, it asserts that the Messiah is the dwelling place of the divine wisdom, the immanent presence of the transcendent God, the visible image of the invisible God of Jewish monotheism. It transfers to Christ language which had belonged in Judaism to the Wisdom and Torah of God. Second, the hymn makes a bold anti-imperial claim. Christ, not Caesar is the image of God, the first, the ruler, the head of the body, the one who makes peace in the world.

Paul says one thing that means two things; it is what we call double referentiality. One word or phrase can be understood in two different ways. On the one hand, it is a theological statement about the meaning and significance of Jesus for the believing community. At the same time, it is a political statement that challenges the claims of the Roman emperor and Roman imperial ideology.

SO WHAT?

My claim is a simple one. The earliest confessions of the Christian faith that are both theological and political statements. What difference does that make to the church in the twenty-first century?

Stanley Hauerwas of Duke University, one of the most prominent and distinguished American theologians, has made the case that the Christianity most North Americans espouse is not Christian at all. People who think that the confession "Jesus is Lord" simply means having a personal relationship with Jesus and does not involve being genuine follower of Jesus in life have not understood what it means to be a Christian. Or, American Christians who believe that the "God" of the American Pledge of Allegiance is the God Christians worship as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit signal great ignorance about the Christian faith (Hauerwas, 182–84).

A confession of faith stands over against some other confession. The earliest Christian confessions are claims of theological and political allegiance that stand over against other claims, multiple gods and Caesar as Lord. To confess that Jesus is Lord is to reject all other gods, to reject idolatry in all of its many different forms. To confess that Jesus is Lord is to reject all political and nationalist claims to allegiance.

I am a dual citizen. I was born in Canada to an American mother. I am both a Canadian and a U.S. citizen from birth. I carry two passports, Canadian and U.S. One day when crossing the Canadian/U.S. border as a college student to work in Canada for the summer, I engaged the Canadian customs agent in conversation. I asked him if there was anything I could do to lose my Canadian citizenship. He said to me, while no one probably would ever know it, you could lose your Canadian citizenship by pledging allegiance to the United States or by voting in a U.S. election. Somewhat startled, I asked "why?" Both actions, he said, represent forms of declar-

ing political allegiance for one country and thus denying your allegiance to the other country. As I reflected on that conversation over the summer, I decided that I would not pledge allegiance in either country, and I would not sing the national anthem in either country.

Some years later, I also decided that I would not vote in elections in either country. If Jesus is Lord, I reasoned, I should not compromise my allegiance to him by declaring allegiance to any national state. Whenever there is a call to the flag or to the singing of the national anthem in either country, I remain seated. I reject all national state claims to allegiance because I understand my confession that Jesus is Lord to be both a theological and a political statement. I will not compromise my confession that Jesus is Lord by declaring allegiance to Caesar in the form of the Canadian or U.S. national states. I, therefore, also reject both governments claims that I must do the bidding of these nation states to kill people they define as enemies whether in times of war or peace. The theological-political call of Jesus to love my enemy takes priority over the political call to kill people in the name of any national state government.

CONCLUSION

The confession that Jesus is Lord is more than a confession that Jesus is my personal savior. That confession calls for singular allegiance to Jesus over against all the other allegiances that make claims upon our lives. I have decided that these "other allegiances" include the claims of national states which are often framed in biblical and theological language, especially in the United States. I know that not all Christians agree with me. What I think is important is that the church think in fresh terms about the theological and political meaning of our fundamental confessions of faith. Christians need to recover the understanding that the confession that Jesus is Lord is simultaneously theological and political. The confession of Jesus as Lord calls us to more than a personal relationship to Christ; it also calls us to a new allegiance that we need to express in public and political ways. It means to say with Paul that our citizenship is in the kingdom of God and not in Rome or Canada or the United States.

WORKS CITED

- Abrahamsen, Valerie A. 1995. *Women and worship at Philippi: Diana/Artemis and other cults in the early Christian era*. Portland, ME: Astarte Shell.
- Bakirtzis, Charalambos and Helmut Koester, eds. 1998. *Philippi at the time of Paul and after his death*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International.

- Beard, Mary and John North, eds. 1990. *Pagan priests: Religion and power in the ancient world*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Denaux, Adelbert. 1996. Theology and Christology in 1 Cor. 8.4–6. In *The Corinthian correspondence*, ed. B. Bieringer, 593–606. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Engels, Donald. 1990. *Roman Corinth: An alternative model for the classical city*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Fee, Gordon. 1995. *Philippians*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans.
- Hauerwas, Stanley. 2007. Why did Jesus have to die? An Attempt to cross the barrier of age. *Princeton Seminary Bulletin* 28: 181–90.
- Heen, Erik Heen. 1997. Saturnalicious precepts: The enthronement of Jesus in early Christian discourse. Ph.D. Dissertation. Columbia University.
- Hoppe, Rudolf. 2004. 1 Cor. 8.1–6 as part of the controversy between Paul and the parish in Corinth.” In *Testimony and interpretation: Early Christology in its Judeo-Hellenistic milieu*, ed. Jiri Mrasek and Jan Roskovec, 28–39. London and New York: T. & T. Clark International.
- Hoskins Walbank, Mary E. 1996. Evidence for the imperial cult in Julio-Claudian Corinth. In *Subject and ruler: The cult of the ruling power in classical antiquity*, ed. Alastair Small, 201–14. *Journal of Roman Archaeology—Supplementary Series #17*. Ann Arbor, MI: *Journal of Roman Archaeology*.
- Oakes, Peter. 2002. God’s sovereignty over Roman authorities: A theme in Philippians. In *Rome in the Bible and the early church*, ed. Peter Oakes, 126–41. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic.
- . 2001. *Philippians: From people to letter*. Society of New Testament Studies Monograph Series 110. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- . 2005. Re-mapping the universe: Paul and the emperor in 1 Thessalonians and Philippians. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 27: 301–22.
- Schowalter, Daniel N. and Steven J. Friesen, eds. 2005. *Urban religion in Roman Corinth: Interdisciplinary approaches*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Taubes, Jacob. 2004. *The political theology of Paul*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Toews, John E. 2009. Righteousness in Romans: The Political Sub-text of Paul’s Letter. In *The Old Testament in the life of God’s people: Essays in honor of Elmer A. Martens*, ed. Jon Isaak, 209–22. Winoona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns.

- . 2004. *Romans*. Believers Church Bible Commentary. Scottdale, PA: Herald.
- Wright, N.T. 1990. The New Testament and the “state.” *Themelios* 16: 11–17.
- . 1991. *The climax of the covenant: Christ and the law in Pauline theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress.