Our revised translation very properly substitutes the word “confession” for “profession” in this passage of Scripture. And the distinction is a very important one. A profession is a declaration concerning our-selves. A confession is a declaration concerning Christ. Strictly speaking, there is no such thing recognized in Scripture as a profession of religion. The Pharisees indeed made such a profession when he said, “O God, I thank thee that I am not as other men are. I fast twice a week. I give tithes of all I possess,” etc. That is a profession of religion. And how unacceptable and odious it was I need not to tell you. God does not ask us to declare to him what we are, or what we have done, but to confess what Christ is, but to confess what Christ is, and what Christ has done for our salvation. A profession points to self, and says, “Oh God, behold me, and see how worthy I am of thy favor and acceptance.” A confession points to Christ, and says “Behold the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world.”

I wish to call your attention this morning to the three kinds of confession pointed out in Scripture ----confession by mouth, profession by baptism, confession by the life. These are the consecutive stages of declaration and acknowledgement of a true faith.

1. Confession by the mouth. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” Mark you, it is a confession of the Lord Jesus and his resurrection from the dead which is here specified as the subject of confession. And this confession is made with the mouth. It is most interesting to observe how minute and specific the declaration of God is concerning the way of life. “With the mouth confession is made into salvation.” Faith cometh by hearing, and so it is that great grace enters into the heart by way of ear-gate. But the confession cometh by speaking, and therefore its declaration must go out through the mouth gate. So that with all our heart we ought to pray the apostle’s prayer, “I may open my mouth boldly to make known the mystery of the Gospel.” There is an old cannon in existence which once used by the Scottish Covenanters. On its brazen lips are inscribed these words, “O Lord, open thou my lips, and my mouth shall show forth thy praise.” There seems to be something of the same martial tone in this text of the apostle. “Fight the good fight of faith,” he says. “Confess a good confession.” Bombard the forts of unbelief by a volley of testimonies. The open mouth of a Christian is a poet-hole of the Spirit of God, which Satan is especially anxious to close. If he can only spike the guns of the young believer, so that he shall not speak for Christ, he has practically conquered him. He has silenced him, which is half the battle, since confession is one-half the condition of life eternal.

Now you can see on the moment’s reflection, why confession holds so important a place is the fact of conversion. In the first place, confession is the development of faith. A good teacher will sometimes say to his pupils, “You don’t know a thing till you tell it.” It is precisely so with faith. A belief unconfused is only half a belief. It may develop into a conviction, or it may subside into unbelief. You cannot determine as yet. The only way to ensure its continuance is to tell it out. It is faith indeed by which we are justified. But faith that is not confessed is not faith. The bird is in the egg. But unless it breaks the shell, and opens its wings, and flies heavenward, it will soon perish. And so faith, if it...
remains only a latent, undeveloped thing, must soon cease to be. It is just as true that faith that faith without words is dead, as that faith without works is dead. There are scores of embryo Christians in every church -- men and women—who, if they would only break the shell, and get their mouths open and their hands to work, would come into the company of the redeemed, but concerning whom, as it is, I have no more hope than I have of getting summer songs and soaring wings from the cold eggs in a last year’s bird’s nest. I see evidences of latent faith in the eager look and the upturned face. But, oh, that these dumb lips would speak, and say, “I confess that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and I own him as my Saviour and my Lord.”

And then, besides, a lip confession gives a certain irrevocableness to our faith. A secret faith I can retract at any moment I choose to do so. It is in my own hands as yet, to do as I please with. I can publish it or suppress it, as I like. But not so when I have confessed it before others. Then it has gone into words, and taken wings to itself, and I can never recall it. Words are the most irrevocable of things. My thoughts, though they are swifter than lightning, I can yet overtake and bring home again. For so long as they are only thoughts, they have not gone out of my keeping. I still have bit and bridle upon them, and can rein them in, and take them back. But my words are not mine. They have gone into other ears, and been recorded in other memories. I have put them out of my keeping. And this I believe to be to be one principal reason why the Lord requires a confession of our faith. Such confession binds us. It has gone on record. It has become common property. I cannot take it back. It is like a letter dropped into the mail-box. Now it is not in my power, but the moment it has passed from my hand, and entered that narrow aperture, it has gone into the public mail and I cannot recall it.

II. “Confession by the ordinance. “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved.”

Here we have our faith declared by a symbol, as it was before by words. Just as in a book you have engravings here and there to illustrate what is contained in the print, and present it graphically to the eye, so in the system of Christianity we have ordinances, which are a pictorial confession of faith, bringing out into clear and bold. And you see that it is all important, in this instance, that the text and the illustrations exactly correspond. A book descriptive of Boston, and filled with engravings representing the principal scenes and streets of London, would be an absurdity. And a Christianity which rests avowedly on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ must have ordinances which exactly correspond to these ideas. Read, now, the confession of the mouth which the Scriptures require, and then compare it with the symbol which Scriptures give. “If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and believe in thy heart that God hath raised him from the dead.” The death and resurrection of Christ is the confession. “I believe that Jesus Christ died for my sins, according to the Scriptures, and that he rose again from the dead, according to the Scriptures.” This is the verbal confession. Now comes the symbolic. “Buried with Christ by baptism into death that like as Christ was raised up from the dead by the glory of the Father even so we also should walk in newness of life.” You see how the picture conforms in every line and shade to the original. You see, then, what baptism is for.
It is, first, a declaration of faith for all time. And all the unbelief and doubt and denial to which the Gospel is exposed, there is great danger that its cardinal truths may be perverted or misread in the course of time. They cannot be entrusted to the stream of tradition, in whose depths so much truth has been engulped, and on whose current so much error has been floated down. They must be stereotyped in unchanging forms, and fresh impressions must be struck for them every year and every month for the book of church history. Do you ask me what I am doing in administering the ordinance of baptism? I am doing what the printer does with his types. I am striking off impressions of our creed, that Christ was buried for our offences, and raised again for our justification.” Upon every mind this impression will be stamped more or less deeply, and be hung up in the chambers of his memory for influencing the faith and determining the creed which we hold. If the ordinance had been maintained in the church in its primitive form, the doctrine of the resurrection would not have been forgotten or denied as largely as it has. There can be no doubt that in those churches where this symbol has been kept most constantly before the eye, the blessed faith of the Redeemer has kept its hold most strongly upon the heart. Do you say that it is only a form, and therefore not essential? The picture of your dead child is only a form. It is a shadow thrown upon paper; there is no substance of life there. But will you, on that account, permit any one to throw it away? Or will you consent that it shall be changed for the picture of some other child, on the plea that it is only a form? Neither will we consent that this graphic picture of our Lord's dying and rising again shall be set aside or modified, because it is only a form. Nay, forms and shadows are among the mightiest forces in the world. The pictures of Raphael and Michael Angelo have influenced humanity more than the battles of Napoleon. The battles were acts and realities indeed, while pictures the pictures are only shadows. But these shadows, becoming reflections of divine thins, are living just as truly to-day as in the year when they were painted. Let us see to it that we do not slight the ordinances of God, however, because they are only shadows.

And then, again, we hold baptism to be the seal of a covenant. Here the agreement between God and the soul is ratified and confirmed. God says, “I give you pardon and peace on the ground of Christ’s death and resurrection.” You say, “I accept pardon and peace on the ground of Christ’s death and resurrection.” Thus there is atonement and reconciliation. But you know it has always been the custom for the contracting parties to confirm this bargain by some seal or signature. You know that in legal terms a contact is sometimes called an indenture. The word suggests a very striking custom from which it originated. In olden times it was the usage for the contracting parties to have two copies of this agreement written on the same parchment. Then they were cut apart by a zigzag line. One party took one copy, and one took the other. These two parts, you see, would exactly correspond when brought together. They would fit into each other as my two hands do. And this was the pledge and symbol of the perfect agreement of the two parties. My brethren, baptism is the indenture which seals the contract between Christ and the forgiven soul. See how exactly the two parts correspond. One is in heaven, and one is on earth. Of that one it is written, “Who died for our sins, and rise again;” of this one, “Buried with
Sermon by the Rev. A. J. Gordon, D. D.
Title: Threefold Confession
Preached in Clarendon Street Church October 25, 1885
Printed in Golden Rule October 29, 1885
Typed from 1885 copy. March 17, 2009 Scanned

Christ in baptism, raised again to newness of life.” Jesus Christ speaks from the throne, saying, “I am he that liveth, and was dead, and behold I am alive forever more.” The disciple speaks from this baptizing, “If I be dead with Christ, I believe that I shall also live with him.” Oh, glorious indenture, telling for all time, and in all languages, and in all climes, that Christ and we are one, that as he is, so we shall be in glory.

And so, also, baptism is a prophecy of good things from the dead the third day, so we shall be raised at his coming. The prophecy is very graphic and striking. Look at this disciple going down into this watery grave. For a moment he disappears. The wave rolls over him, as the stone was rolled before the tomb of Christ to seal it. There is the stillness and pause and quiver of death. “Buried with Christ.” Then there is the joyful, exultant, victorious rising to life. The dead come back to life. Even so shall it be when the trumpet shall sound, and the dead in Christ shall rise, with bodies fashioned like unto his glorious body.

III. The confession of the life. “Thou hast confessed a good confession before many witnesses.” This is the highest and crowning confession. This puts the seal and climax upon both the others. If a man’s life is only the blurred and unsightly perversion of his confession, instead of its living fac-simile, he is the greatest reproach upon Christianity which it has to bear. Now what kind of a life and example does the ordinance of baptism, as I have explained it, call for? It calls for a life dead to the world and crucified to sin. That means, a life which is insensible to the appeals of fashion and wealth and honor and self indulgence. “All that is in the world” the apostle sums up as the lusts of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life.” But Paul, looking upon all these things, exclaims, “I am crucified unto the world, and the world unto me? What impression do gold and silver and stocks make upon the folded palms of the dead man in his coffin? What appeal can civil honor make to the citizen who was last week laid away in Mount Auburn? And yet this condition of deadness to the world and all it contains is the high ideal which Paul set before Christians. I do not say that it can be attained at once. If it could, we should be perfect at once. It is the last and highest result of the discipline and trial and endeavor of an earnest life.

But I ask you, is such a life your aim and desire? Are you, to use the apostle’s word, obeying from the heart that forms of doctrine to which you are committed? Ah, what reservations and withholdings are there from such a life! How we shrink from being utterly given up to God, through separation from the world! In the first Christianization of Great Britain the practice of immersion was universal. I have read that when a certain warrior chief came to be baptized, he held up his right hand, that it might not be submerged with the rest of his body. And when asked the reason of this strange conduct, he replied, “I wish to reserve this right hand to fight my enemies with.” Alas, how many such reservations there are on the part of baptized Christians! A right hand kept back, with which to grasp covetously for wealth and honor; a right foot kept back, with which to stand I half hearted attachment to the present evil world; a right eye kept back, with which to feast upon the glitter and
Sermon by the Rev. A. J. Gordon, D. D.
Title: Threefold Confession
Preached in Clarendon Street Church October 25, 1885
Printed in Golden Rule October 29, 1885
Typed from 1885 copy. March 17, 2009 Scanned

But what was God’s requirement for consecration unto the Law? “Thou shalt take the look of a lamb, and sprinkle it upon the right ear, on the right hand, and upon the right foot. And what under the Gospel? I beseech you, therefore, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice,” every power and part of us devoted to God in living service and for the furtherance of his glory. Does this seem too high and lofty and ideal for us to reach? Let us, at least, from this time onward, strive for it. Forgetting the things which are behind, and reaching forth to those things which are before, never giving over till we attain unto the fulness of the measures of the stature of Christ.