



Confessing Jesus in Science

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When one confesses, one declares a commitment. The act of confession is like “stepping forward” or “standing up and being counted.” You step forward for a person, and by that act you commit yourself to the person. If he goes down, you go down. You stand up for a person, and by that act you commit yourself to that person. If she goes on, you go on. Similarly, you confess your faith in someone, and by that act you commit yourself to believing in him. If he comes through, you come through.

It is striking that simply by the act of confession—by saying certain words—you do something. Those who utter the sentence: “I confess that Jesus is Lord” have confessed. Those people have by their confession committed themselves to Jesus Christ. Confessors commit themselves to Jesus Christ, putting themselves under his disposal, and positioning themselves in a certain way against everybody else. Christ had called for precisely this when he said, “Everyone who confesses me before men, I also will confess before my Father” (Mt 10:32), just as Paul also had in mind when he said, “If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord . . .” (Rom 10:9). To borrow from the Small Catechism on Jesus the Lord, one confesses “that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.” Christians today and in every age do so by the very act of confession.

This is an excerpt from an important article by the Lutheran theologian at Concordia seminary. Okamoto, Joel (2015) “[Making Sense of Confessionalism Today](#),” Concordia Journal: Vol. 41 : No. 1 , Article 5. The article is focused on Lutherans, but his take on the importance of confessing “Jesus is Lord” is particularly relevant in the dialogue between science and theology. Our current debates would change dramatically if this confession became commonplace. [See my own confession here.](#)

But how can mere words do this? Confession is an example of what philosopher J. L. Austin calls a “performative.”¹ According to Austin, performatives “all will have, as it happens, humdrum verbs in the first person singular present indicative active. Utterances can be found, satisfying these conditions, yet such that: A. they do not ‘describe’ or ‘report’ or constate [sic] anything at all, are not ‘true or false’; and B. the uttering of the sentence is, or is a part of, the doing of an action, which again would not normally be described as, or as ‘just’, saying something.”²

Some examples of what Austin called “explicit” performative sentences include:³ I promise to take out the trash. I bet five dollars that “Goofy” will win the race. I order you to leave the room. They are not, by contrast, describing a promise, reporting a bet, or recounting an order. They are doing those things. As Austin puts it, “There is something which is at the moment of uttering being done by the person uttering.”

What happens when people utter these sentences? They are promising to take out the trash; they are betting five dollars on a race; they are ordering someone to leave.

Confession works in the same way. When people utter the sentence, “I confess that Jesus is Lord,” they are confessing. They are not stating a fact about Jesus. They are enacting a commitment by speaking. By making the confession, you bind yourself to what you confess. This is how confession has normative force.⁴

1. See especially J. L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, second ed., ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962). See also Austin, “Performative Utterances,” in *Philosophical Papers*, 220–239 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961). For a persuasive account of how performatives work, see John R. Searle, “How Performatives Work,” in *Consciousness and Language*, 156–179 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
2. Austin, *How to Do Things*, 5.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*, 60.

References

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<https://peacefulscience.org/pdf/swamidass-confident-faith.pdf>