
THE BELIEVER AND POSITIVE CONFESSION

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The Assemblies of God from its early days has recognized the importance of the life of faith. It has been given prominent emphasis because Scripture gives it prominence.

The writer to the Hebrews points out that without faith it is impossible to please God. Then he describes faith as believing two things—that God is, and that He is the rewarder of them that diligently seek Him (Hebrews 11:6).

All the blessings which God has for His people are received through faith. Salvation (Acts 16:31), baptism in the Holy Spirit (Acts 11:15-17), divine preservation (1 Peter 1:5), inheritance of the promises which include healing and provision of material needs (Hebrews 6:12), and motivation for witnessing (2 Corinthians 4:13) are among the many provisions of God's grace.

Today, as in every generation, it is important for believers to be mindful of the example in Scripture of being strong in faith (Romans 4:20-24). They must be on guard against anything which would weaken or destroy faith. They need to pray for its increase (Luke 17:5) and constantly seek to cultivate it through reading the Word of God (Romans 10:17).

The Believer and Positive Confession

Occasionally throughout church history people have taken extreme positions concerning great Biblical truths. Sometimes teachers have advocated these extremes. On other occasions followers have gone beyond the teachings and reflected adversely on the cause of Christ.

Positive and *negative confession* are expressions which in recent years have received acceptance in an extreme form in some circles. Both the definition in writing and the pattern of usage give some insight into the implications of these terms.

The fact that extremes are brought into focus does not imply rejection of the doctrine of confession. It is an important truth. The Bible teaches people are to confess their sin (1 John 1:9). They are to confess Christ (Matthew 10:32; Romans 10:9, 10). They are to maintain a good confession (Hebrews 4:14; 10:23, ASV).

But when people, in emphasizing a doctrine, go beyond or contrary to the teaching of Scripture, they do not honor that doctrine. Conversely, they bring reproach

upon it and the work of the Lord. For this reason it is important to call attention to these excesses and show how they are in conflict with the Word of God.

Some Positions of the Positive Confession Teaching

The positive confession teaching relies on an English dictionary definition of the word *confess*: “to acknowledge, or to own; to acknowledge faith in.” Confession is also described as affirming something which is believed, testifying to something known, and witnessing for a truth which has been embraced.

This view goes a step further and divides confession into negative and positive aspects. The negative is acknowledging sin, sickness, poverty, or other undesirable situations. Positive confession is acknowledging or owning desirable situations.

While there are variations of interpretation and emphasis concerning this teaching, a conclusion seems to be that the unpleasant can be avoided by refraining from negative confessions. The pleasant can be enjoyed by making positive confessions.

According to this view, as expressed in various publications, the believer who refrains from acknowledging the negative and continues to affirm the positive will assure for himself pleasant circumstances. He will be able to rule over poverty, disease, and sickness. He will be sick only if he confesses he is sick. Some make a distinction between acknowledging the symptoms of an illness and the illness itself.

This view advocates that God wants believers to wear the best clothing, drive the best cars, and have the best of everything. Believers need not suffer financial setbacks. All they need to do is to tell Satan to take his hands off their money. The believer can have whatever he says whether the need is spiritual, physical, or financial. It is taught that faith compels God's action.

According to this position, what a person says determines what he will receive and what he will become. Thus people are instructed to start confessing even though what they want may not have been realized. If a person wants money, he is to confess he has it even if it is not true. If a person wants healing, he is to confess it even though it is obviously not the case. People are told they can have whatever they say, and for this reason great significance is attached to the spoken word. It is claimed the spoken word, if repeated often enough, will eventually result in faith which procures the desired blessing.

It is understandable that some people would like to accept the positive confession teaching. It promises a life free from problems, and its advocates seem to support it with passages of Scripture. Problems develop, however, when Bible statements are isolated from their context and from what the rest of Scripture has to say concerning the subject. Extremes result which distort truth and eventually hurt believers as individuals and the cause of Christ in general.

When believers study the life of faith and victory God has for His people, it is important, as in all doctrine, to seek for the balanced emphasis of Scripture. This will help to avoid the extremes which eventually frustrate rather than help believers in their walk with God.

Believers Should Consider the Total Teaching of Scripture.

The apostle Paul gave an important principle of interpreting Scripture which calls for “comparing spiritual things with spiritual” (1 Corinthians 2:13). The basic thrust of this principle is to consider everything God’s Word has to say on a given subject in establishing doctrine. Only doctrine based on a holistic view of Scripture conforms to this Biblical rule of interpretation.

When the positive confession teaching indicates that to admit weakness is to accept defeat, to admit financial need is to accept poverty, and to admit sickness is to preclude healing, it is going beyond and is contrary to the harmony of Scripture.

For instance, King Jehoshaphat admitted he had no might against an enemy alliance, but God gave him a marvelous victory (2 Chronicles 20). Paul admitted weakness and then stated that when he was weak, he was strong because God’s strength is made perfect in weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9,10).

It was after the disciples recognized they did not have enough to feed the multitudes and admitted it that Christ marvelously provided a more than adequate supply (Luke 9:12, 13). It was after the disciples admitted they had caught no fish that Jesus directed them to a most successful endeavor (John 21:3-6).

These people were not told to replace negative confessions with positive confessions which were contrary to fact. They stated conditions exactly as they were rather than pretending they were something else. Yet God marvelously intervened even though they made what some would call negative confessions.

Comparing Scripture with Scripture makes it clear that positive verbal expressions do not always produce happy effects, nor do negative statements always result in unhappy effects. To teach that leaders in the early days of the Church such as Paul, Stephen, and Trophimus did not live in a constant state of affluence and health because they did not have the light on this teaching is going beyond and contrary to the Word of God. Doctrine will be sound only as it is developed within the framework of the total teaching of Scripture.

The Greek word translated “confess” means “to speak the same thing.” When people confess Christ, it is to say the same thing as Scripture does concerning Christ. When people confess sin, it is to say the same as Scripture does concerning sin. And when people confess some promise of Scripture, they must be sure they are saying the same thing about that promise as the total teaching of Scripture on that subject.

The words of Augustine are appropriate in this regard: "If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don't like, it is not the gospel you believe, but yourself."

Believers Should Consider Adequately the Will of God.

When the positive confession doctrine indicates a person can have whatever he says, it fails to emphasize adequately that God's will must be considered. David had the best intentions when he indicated his desire to build a temple for the Lord, but it was not God's will (1 Chronicles 17:4). David was permitted to gather materials, but Solomon was to build the temple.

Paul prayed that the thorn in his flesh might be removed, but it was not God's will. Instead of removing the thorn, God gave Paul sufficient grace (2 Corinthians 12:9).

God's will can be known and claimed by faith, but the desire of the heart is not always the criterion by which the will of God is determined. There are times when the enjoyable or pleasurable may not be the will of God. James alluded to this when he wrote, "Ye ask, and receive not, because ye ask amiss, that ye may consume it upon your lusts" (James 4:3). The word translated "lusts" does not refer to perverted desire but to pleasure or enjoyment; that which the heart desires. Several translations use the word "pleasure" rather than "lust."

In Gethsemane Jesus asked that if it were possible the cup might be removed. That was His desire, but in His prayer He recognized the will of God. He said, "Nevertheless, not my will, but thine, be done" (Luke 22:42).

The Bible recognizes there will be times when a believer will not know what to pray for. He will not know what the will of God is. He may even be perplexed as Paul sometimes was (2 Corinthians 4:8). Then, rather than simply making a positive confession based on the desires of the heart, the believer needs to recognize the Holy Spirit makes intercession for him according to the will of God (Romans 8:26, 27).

God's will always must have priority over the believer's plans or desires. The words of James should be kept constantly in view: "Ye ought to say, If the Lord will, we shall live, and do this, or that" (James 4:15).

Getting what the believer wants is not as simple as repeating a positive confession. Pleasant things might be out of the will of God; and, conversely, unpleasant things might be in the will of God. It is important for the believer to say as Paul's friends did, "The will of the Lord be done" (Acts 21:14)-more important than to demand a life free from suffering.

Believers Should Recognize the Importance of Importunate Prayer.

When the positive confession view teaches that believers are to confess rather than to pray for things which God has promised, it overlooks the teaching of God's Word concerning importunate prayer. According to some who hold this view of positive confession, God's promises are in the area of material, physical, and spiritual blessings; believers are to claim or confess these blessings and not to pray for them.

The instruction not to pray for promised blessings is contrary to the teaching of God's Word. Food is one of God's promised blessings, yet Jesus taught His disciples to pray: "Give us this day our daily bread" (Matthew 6:11). Wisdom is a promised blessing of God, yet Scripture states, if any man "lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not" (James 1:5). Jesus called the Holy Spirit the promise of the Father (Luke 24:49), and yet He also taught that God would give the Holy Spirit to them that ask (Luke 11:13).

While there were times God told people not to pray, as in the case of Moses at the Red Sea (Exodus 14:15), there are many Scriptures reminding believers to pray, and that, without ceasing (Romans 12:12; Philippians 4:6, 1 Thessalonians 5:17).

Jesus emphasized the importance of importunity in prayer. The illustration of the persistent friend who came at midnight asking for bread to set before his guests became the basis for Christ's statement, "Ask, and it shall be given you" (Luke 11:5-10). The parable of the widow and the unjust judge became the occasion for our Lord to emphasize importunity in prayer (Luke 18:1-8). These people were commended for importunity and not for prayerless positive confession.

While God's ways are above man's ways, and we cannot understand the reason for every command in Scripture, we do know that in His wisdom God has ordained prayer as part of the process included in meeting a need. Rather than an indication of doubt, importunate prayer can be an indication of obedience and faith.

Believers Should Recognize They Can Expect Suffering in This Life.

The positive confession teaching advocates reigning as kings in this life. It teaches that believers are to dominate and not be dominated by circumstances. Poverty and sickness are usually mentioned among the circumstances over which believers are to have dominion.

If believers choose the kings of this world as models, it is true they will seek the trouble-free life (although even kings of this world are not free from problems). They will be more concerned with physical and material prosperity than with spiritual growth.

When believers choose the King of kings as their model, however, their desires will be completely different. They will be transformed by His teaching and example.

They will recognize the truth of Romans 8:17 which is written concerning joint-heirs with Christ: "If so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together." Paul even went so far as to glory in his infirmities instead of denying them (2 Corinthians 12:5-10).

Though Christ was rich, for our sakes He became poor (2 Corinthians 8:9). He could say, "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20).

While God in His providence has endowed some with the ability to accumulate greater wealth than others, something is tragically lacking if there is not a willingness to do the will of God and surrender all, if need be, including creature comforts.

Jesus never ceased to be God, and through the power of the Holy Spirit performed many miracles; yet He was not free from suffering. He knew He must suffer many things of the elders (Matthew 16:21; 17:12). He desired to eat the Passover with the disciples before He suffered (Luke 22:15). After His death, the disciples recognized that Christ's suffering was a fulfillment of prophecy (Luke 24:25, 26, 32).

When believers realize that reigning as kings in this life is to take Christ as the model of a king, they will recognize suffering can be involved; that sometimes it is more kingly to stay with unpleasant circumstances than to try to make all circumstances pleasant.

Paul had been shown he would suffer (Acts 9:16). Later he rejoiced in his sufferings for the Colossians. He saw his suffering as filling up "that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for his body's sake, which is the church" (Colossians 1:24).

God promises to supply the needs of believers, and He knows how to deliver the godly out of temptation; but reigning in life as Christ did may also include suffering. The committed believer will accept this. He will not be disillusioned if life is not a continual series of pleasant experiences. He will not become cynical if he does not have all the desires of his heart.

He will recognize the servant is not greater than his Master. To follow Christ requires denying ourselves (Luke 9:23). This includes denying our selfish desires and may include admitting our problems.

Problems are not always an indication of lack of faith. To the contrary, they can be a tribute to faith. This is the great emphasis of Hebrews 11:32-40:

And what shall I more say? For the time would fail me to tell of Gideon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthah; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens.

Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; of whom the world was not worthy: they wandered in deserts, and in mountains and in dens and caves of the earth.

And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

To hold that all suffering results from negative confessions and indicates a lack of faith contradicts the Scripture. Some heroes of faith suffered greatly, some even died through faith, and they were commended for it.

Believers Should Recognize the Sovereignty of God.

The positive confession emphasis has a tendency to include statements which make it appear that man is sovereign and God is the servant. Statements are made about compelling God to act, implying He has surrendered His sovereignty; that He is no longer in a position to act according to His wisdom and purpose. Reference is made to true prosperity being the ability to use God's ability and power to meet needs regardless of what the needs are. This puts man in the position of using God rather than man surrendering himself to be used of God.

In this view there is very little consideration given to communion with God in order to discover His will. There is very little appeal to search the Scriptures for the framework of the will of God. There is little emphasis on the kind of discussion with fellow believers which results in two or three agreeing what the will of God might be. Instead, the desire of the heart is viewed as a binding mandate on God. It is seen as constituting the authority of the believer.

It is true that Jesus said, "Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (John 14:13). But Scripture also teaches that the asking must be in harmony with the will of God. "This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us: and if we know that he hear us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him" (1 John 5:14, 15).

"Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10) is still an important injunction today. God is God. He will not surrender His glory or sovereignty to anyone. No one will compel God to action.

The authority of the believer exists only in the will of God, and it is the believer's responsibility to discover and conform to the will of the sovereign God even in the things he desires. Paul's words are still applicable: "Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord is" (Ephesians 5:17).

When believers recognize the sovereignty of God and properly become concerned with the will of God, they will not talk in terms of compelling God or using God's power. They will speak of becoming obedient servants. They will desire to become yielded instruments in the hands of God.

Believers Should Apply the Practical Test.

In reviewing the efforts of those who advocate this positive confession teaching it is evident that the basic appeal is to those who are already Christians living in an affluent society. They encourage a spiritual elitism in which adherents say, "We believe the same things you do. The difference is that we practice what we believe."

A practical test of a belief is whether it has a universal application. Does the teaching have meaning only for those living in an affluent society? Or does it also work among the refugees of the world? What application does the teaching have for believers imprisoned for their faith by atheistic governments? Are those believers substandard who suffer martyrdom or grave physical injury at the hands of cruel, ruthless dictators?

The truth of God's Word has a universal application. It is as effective in the slums as in suburbia. It is as effective in the jungle as in the city. It is as effective in foreign countries as in our own nation. It is as effective among deprived nations as among the affluent. The test of fruit is still one way of determining whether a teacher or teaching is of God or of man. "By their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20).

Believers Should Accurately Deal With the Word *Rhema*.

Because there is very little literature among those who espouse the positive confession teaching concerning the Greek word *rhema*, it is necessary to consider it as used primarily in oral communication.

A distinction is generally made by proponents of this view between the words *logos* and *rhema*. The first, it is claimed, refers to the written word. The second, to that which is presently spoken by faith. According to this view whatever is spoken by faith becomes inspired and takes on the creative power of God.

There are two major problems with this distinction. First, the distinction is not justified by usage either in the Greek New Testament or in the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament). The words are used synonymously in both.

In the case of the Septuagint both *rhema* and *logos* are used to translate the one Hebrew word *dabar* which is used in various ways relative to communication. For instance, the word *dabar* (translated, word of God) is used in both Jeremiah 1:1 and 2. Yet in the Septuagint it is translated *rhema* in verse 1 and *logos* in verse 2.

In the New Testament the words *rhema* and *logos* are also used interchangeably. This can be seen in passages such as 1 Peter 1:23 and 25. In verse 23, it is “the *logos* of God which . . . abideth for ever.” In verse 25, “the *rhema* of the Lord endureth for ever.” Again in Ephesians 5:26 believers are cleansed “with the washing of water by the *rhema*.” In John 15:3 believers are “clean through the *logos*.”

The distinctions between *logos* and *rhema* cannot be sustained by Biblical evidence. The Word of God, whether referred to as *logos* or *rhema*, is inspired, eternal, dynamic, and miraculous. Whether the Word is written or spoken does not alter its essential character. “All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works” (2 Timothy 3:16, 17).

A second problem also exists among those who make a distinction between the words *logos* and *rhema*. Passages of Scripture are sometimes selected without regard to context or analogy of faith, which they claim to speak by faith. In this kind of application of the so-called *rhema* principle, adherents are more concerned with making the Word mean what they want it to mean than in becoming what the Word wants them to become. In some instances it becomes obvious they love God more for what He does than for who He is.

It is important for believers to avoid any form of Christian existentialism which isolates passages of Scripture from the context or makes some passages eternal and others contemporary.

Conclusion

In considering any doctrine it is always necessary to ask whether it is in harmony with the total teaching of Scripture. Doctrine based on less than a holistic view of Biblical truth can only do harm to the cause of Christ. It can often be more detrimental than views which reject Scripture altogether. Some people will more likely accept something as truth if it is referred to in the Word of God, even if the teaching is an extreme emphasis or contradicts other principles of Scripture.

God’s Word does teach great truths such as healing, provision for need, faith, and the authority of believers. The Bible does teach that a disciplined mind is an important factor in victorious living. But these truths must always be considered in the framework of the total teaching of Scripture.

When abuses occur, there is sometimes a temptation to draw back from these great truths of God’s Word. In some cases people even lose out with God altogether when they discover that exaggerated emphases do not always meet their expectations or result in freedom from problems.

The fact that doctrinal aberrations develop, however, is not a reason for rejecting or remaining silent concerning them. The existence of differences of opinion is all the more reason why believers should continue diligently to search the Scriptures. It is why servants of God must faithfully declare the whole counsel of God.

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