

WORD AND FAITH

# The Word Is Near You

*Romans 10:9 and the Confession God Puts in Your Mouth*

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Essay · By **Larry Herzog Jr.** · *Ordinary Means*  
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## A Verse Turned into a Formula

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Few verses in the New Testament have been asked to carry as much weight as Romans 10:9. On the Romans Road tract it is the last stop before the prayer printed at the bottom of the page. At the close of a revival meeting it becomes the script: say these words, mean them in your heart, and you are in.

that if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. (Romans 10:9)

Read that way, the verse is a contract with two terms. You supply the confession and the belief. God supplies the salvation. And the question that follows such a contract is never far behind: did I mean it enough? Was my heart really in it, or only my mouth? Plenty of earnest Christians have prayed the prayer a second time, and a tenth time, because they could not be sure the first one took.

The irony is that Paul wrote this verse to put an end to exactly that kind of anxiety. Pulled out of its paragraph, Romans 10:9 sounds like a condition you must meet. Left in its place, it describes what the preached word does when it arrives. This essay reads the verse in its place, from Romans 9:30 through 10:17, and listens to what the Lutheran Confessions hear in it.

## Two Kinds of Righteousness (9:30–10:5)

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Paul’s argument does not begin at 10:9. It begins at 9:30 with a puzzle. Gentiles, who were not chasing righteousness at all, have obtained it, “a righteousness that is by faith.” Israel, who chased a law of righteousness with everything they had, has not. Why not? Paul’s answer is blunt: “Because their pursuit was not by faith, but as if it were by works” (9:32). They tripped over the stone God laid in Zion, and Paul closes the chapter with Isaiah’s promise about that stone: “the one who believes in Him will never be put to shame” (9:33).

Hold on to that line. Paul will quote it again in 10:11, and everything between the two quotations, including our verse, sits inside those brackets.

Chapter 10 opens with Paul’s own prayer for his kinsmen. He does not mock them. He grants that “they are zealous for God, but not on the basis of knowledge” (10:2). Their problem was not a lack of sincerity. Their problem was that “they were ignorant of God’s righteousness and sought to establish their own” (10:3). Then comes the hinge of the whole section: “For Christ is the end of the law, to bring righteousness to everyone who believes” (10:4).

Paul now sets two righteousnesses side by side. The first speaks through Moses: “The man who does these things will live by them” (10:5, quoting Leviticus 18:5). That is the righteousness of the law. It is not a bad thing. It is simply a righteousness of doing, and it gives life only to the one who actually does all of it.

This is where the formula reading of 10:9 runs into trouble. If confessing and believing are two things I must do in order to live, then Romans 10:9 has become Leviticus 18:5 in a new costume. The man who does these two things will live by them. Paul spent the previous four verses explaining why that road ends in stumbling. He is not about to hand us a shorter version of it.

## The Word Is Near You (10:6–8)

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The second righteousness does not do. It speaks. Paul personifies it, and the first thing out of its mouth is a prohibition:

But the righteousness that is by 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).” (10:6-7)

Paul is reading Deuteronomy 30, where Moses tells Israel that God’s word is not far off in the sky or across the sea. Paul hears Christ in it. You do not need to climb into heaven to fetch Christ down. He has already come down, born of the virgin. You do not need to dig into the grave to bring Him up. He has already been raised. Every religious project that tries to reach God is either a ladder going up or a shovel going down, and the righteousness of faith forbids both.

Then comes the positive word:

But what does it say? “The word is near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart,” that is, the word of faith we are proclaiming: (10:8)

Notice how the word gets near. It is near because it is proclaimed. Paul does not say the word is near because you have a spiritual sense of it, or because you have opened your heart to it. He says it is near because “we are proclaiming” it. The word reaches your mouth and your heart by way of a preacher’s mouth and your ear.

Notice also the order: mouth, then heart. That order comes straight from Deuteronomy 30:14, and it explains why Romans 10:9 puts confession before belief. Paul is not ranking them or giving a sequence of steps. He is following the wording of the text he just quoted.

And notice the colon at the end of verse 8. Verse 9 begins with “that,” which in Greek (*hoti*) introduces the content of what was just mentioned. Romans 10:9 is not a new instruction tacked onto Paul’s argument. It is the word of faith itself, spelled out. It is what the preachers are preaching.

## Mouth and Heart (10:9-10)

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Put verses 9 and 10 next to each other and a pattern appears.

that if you confess with your mouth, “Jesus is Lord,” and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with your heart you believe and are justified, and with your mouth you confess and are saved. (10:9-10)

Verse 9 runs mouth, then heart. Verse 10 runs heart, then mouth. This is a chiasm, a crossing pattern common in Hebrew writing, and a chiasm is not a flowchart. If Paul meant to give us two steps in order, he would have to tell us which order. He gives us both. That is how you know he is not describing a procedure. He is describing one faith from two sides: the faith that trusts inwardly and the faith that speaks outwardly.

The same holds for “justified” and “saved” in verse 10. They are not two stages, as if the heart gets you halfway and the mouth finishes the job. They are parallel ways of naming the one gift. Elsewhere Paul borrows the psalmist’s words to say that he believed, and so he spoke (2 Corinthians 4:13). Faith that has received the word cannot keep from saying it back. The mouth confesses because the heart has been filled, not in order to get the heart filled.

What about the “if”? Doesn’t a conditional sentence put the burden on me? Not every “if” names a price. Some name the shape of receiving. “If you eat this bread, you will be fed” does not mean that chewing earns nourishment. It describes how food gets into you. The “if” of Romans 10:9 works the same way. It is a promise addressed to the hearer, telling him what the proclaimed word brings: the one who has Christ on his lips and in his heart has salvation, because that is where Christ gives it.

Lutherans have always read the conditional promises of Scripture this way. A promise of God is not a deal in which God does His part once we have done ours. It is a gift held out, and faith is the empty hand that takes it. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, taking up this very passage, insists that confession saves only on account of faith. The mouth is not a second instrument of justification standing beside the heart.

## What “Jesus Is Lord” Confesses

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The confession in verse 9 is two words in Greek: *Kyrios Iēsous*. It is easy to hear them as a statement of personal commitment, as if “Jesus is Lord” meant “I have decided to let Jesus run my life.” Paul means something much larger.

In the Greek Old Testament that Paul and his readers used, *Kyrios* is the word that stands in for the divine name, the LORD of Israel. Paul makes the connection himself four verses later, when he quotes Joel: “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved”

(10:13). In Joel the Lord is the God of Israel. In Romans the Lord is Jesus. To confess “Jesus is Lord” is to confess that the crucified man from Nazareth is the God who brought Israel out of Egypt. That is a doctrinal claim before it is a devotional one.

The heart’s belief is just as specific: “that God raised Him from the dead.” Faith in Romans 10 is not a general sincerity or a warm openness toward God. It has an object and a content. It trusts a particular person and a particular event. A heart can be entirely sincere and believe the wrong thing. The zeal of 10:2 proves it.

The Greek verb for “confess” (*homologeō*) means to say the same thing. To confess is to say back what God has already said. That is why the church has never left confession up to the creativity of each believer. From the beginning, the church gave its people words to say. “Jesus is Lord” was very likely one of the earliest of those words, spoken at baptism and spoken in worship. In a world where every coin and every civic oath declared that Caesar was lord, it was also a costly thing to say out loud.

The creeds grew from that seed. When a Lutheran congregation stands after the readings and says the Apostles’ or Nicene Creed together, it is doing what Romans 10:9 describes. The word has been proclaimed. The hearers say it back. Nobody invents the words. They receive them and return them, and in doing so they confess with the mouth what the Spirit has worked in the heart.

## Everyone Who Calls (10:11–13)

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Here is the second bracket. Paul quotes Isaiah 28:16 again, but this time he leans on one word: “Anyone who believes in Him will never be put to shame” (10:11). Then he explains why the word “anyone” matters: “For there is no difference between Jew and Greek: The same Lord is Lord of all, and gives richly to all who call on Him, for, ‘Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved’” (10:12–13).

The promise has no fine print. It is not offered to an elect few while being quietly withheld from everyone else, and it is not limited to one nation. The Lord who is Lord of all gives richly to all. Lutherans confess a grace that is truly universal in its offer, because the word preached to every hearer is meant seriously for every hearer.

But what does it mean to “call on the name of the Lord”? In the Old Testament, calling on the name of the LORD was worship language. Abraham built an altar and called on the name of the LORD (Genesis 12:8). People called on the name where God had put His name: at the altar, later at the tabernacle and the temple. Calling on the name was not a private technique. It was the response of God’s people at the place where God had promised to be found.

The apostles heard Joel the same way. Peter quoted this very verse at Pentecost (Acts 2:21). When his hearers were cut to the heart and asked what they should do, he did not lead them in a prayer. He told them to repent and be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of their sins (Acts 2:38). When Ananias came to the blinded Saul, he told

him to be baptized and wash away his sins, calling on the Lord's name (Acts 22:16). In apostolic practice, calling on the name and being washed in the name belonged together. The name is called on where the name has been placed.

## How Then? (10:14-17)

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If the formula reading were right, Paul could have stopped at verse 13. Instead he asks a string of questions that take the whole thing apart from the other end:

How then can they call on the One in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in the One of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can they preach unless they are sent? (10:14-15)

Paul runs the chain backward: calling depends on believing, believing on hearing, hearing on preaching, preaching on sending. Now turn it around and read it forward, the way it actually happens. God sends. The sent one preaches. The hearer hears. Through that hearing faith is created. Faith calls on the name and confesses with the mouth.

Decision theology starts at the far end of this chain, with the human act of calling or deciding, and treats it as the beginning. Paul starts where God starts. The first link is not the sinner's choice. It is God's sending. Every link after it hangs from that one.

Verse 16 adds a sober note: "But not all of them welcomed the good news." The word can be resisted. The same proclamation that creates faith in one hearer is refused by another, and Scripture lays the blame for that refusal on the one who refuses, never on a word that was only pretending to be offered.

Then Paul draws the conclusion that controls the whole chapter:

Consequently, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. (10:17)

This is the key to verse 9. The belief of the heart that Paul spoke of in verse 9 does not come from looking inward and working it up. It comes from outside, through the ear, by the word of Christ. You cannot produce the faith of Romans 10:9 by trying harder to believe. You receive it by hearing Christ preached.

## What the Confessions Hear in Romans 10

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The Lutheran Confessions did not invent this reading. They inherited it from Paul and set it down plainly.

The Augsburg Confession, Article V, could almost be a commentary on Romans 10:14-17. To obtain justifying faith, God instituted the office of preaching and gave the gospel and the sacraments. Through these, as through means, He gives the Holy Spirit, who works faith where and when He wills in those who hear the gospel (AC V.1-2). Sent, preached, heard, believed: Paul's chain is all there.

The Smalcald Articles press the point against every form of religion that looks for God apart from His word. Luther insists that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament, and that anything boasted of as Spirit apart from that Word is the devil (SA III.8.10). The "enthusiasts" Luther opposed wanted a word in the heart that bypassed the word in the ear. Romans 10:8 will not allow it. The word is in your heart because it was first proclaimed to you.

The Small Catechism puts Romans 10 into the mouth of every child. In the explanation of the Third Article, the catechumen confesses that he cannot by his own reason or strength believe in Jesus Christ or come to Him, but that the Holy Spirit has called him through the gospel (SC, Creed, Third Article). That is Romans 10:17 in the first person. And notice that the child says it with his mouth, in words given to him. That is Romans 10:9 in practice.

The Formula of Concord, in its article on free will (FC SD II), leans on the same apostolic order. The Spirit does not convert people by a private inner nudge. He works through the hearing of the preached word, and God wants that word heard. No one is told to wait for an experience before coming to church.

This is why Romans 10:9 cannot be a new law for Lutherans. A law tells you what to do in order to live. Romans 10:9 tells you what the gospel does when it reaches you: it puts Christ in your mouth and in your heart. Apology IV teaches that faith justifies not because it is a fine work, but because it receives what the promise offers. The confession of the mouth is the fruit of that receiving and its public witness. It is never a second payment.

## For the One Who Wonders Whether It Took

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Some who read this have prayed the prayer, maybe many times, and still lie awake asking whether it counted. Was the confession loud enough? Was the belief deep enough? Was the heart in it, or just the mouth?

Notice what those questions are. They are attempts to climb into heaven to check God's books, or to dig down into the depths of your own heart to inspect what is there. They are the very questions Romans 10:6-7 forbids. "Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?'" Do not go looking for Christ up there or down there. You will not find certainty in either place.

Instead, Paul points you to verse 8: the word is near you. Not the word you worked up, but the word that was brought to you. It was put on you at the font, when the triune name was spoken over you with the water. It is put in your ears every time the pastor says, "I forgive you all your sins." It is put in your mouth at the Lord's table, where Christ gives Himself to

you for the forgiveness of sins. It is put on your lips every Sunday when you stand with the congregation and say, “I believe.” None of these depend on how sincere you felt that morning. They depend on Christ, who is there because He promised to be.

Your sincerity is not the object of your faith. Christ crucified and raised is. Faith that clings to Him is real faith even when it is weak, because what saves is not the strength of the grip but the One gripped. The bruised reed He will not break.

So Romans 10:9 is not a test to pass. It is a description of what God has already done for you in His word: put the name of Jesus in your mouth and the risen Christ in your heart. And the promise that brackets the whole passage holds even on your worst night: “Anyone who believes in Him will never be put to shame.” Not because the believing was perfect, but because He is.

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Scripture quotations are from the Berean Standard Bible. Confessional references follow the Kolb-Wengert edition of the Book of Concord.