

Time to 'Fess Up

Matthew 16:13-20

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In this election year, it is not uncommon for candidates to change their positions on certain issues. Both presidential candidates are accusing one another of waffling on one issue or another, all in the name of trying to garner more votes. I'm reminded of the politician who spoke passionately one evening to a group of supporters, waxing eloquently on his position on several issues. At the end of the speech, he told his audience, "Those are my convictions; if you don't like them, I have some others."

All politics aside, at some point in our spiritual journey we are all called to declare our faith.

Such was the case when Jesus and his disciples ventured into the District of Caesarea Philippi, an area about 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The region was fraught with religious diversity. The place was littered with the temples of the Syrian gods. Here also was the elaborate marble temple that had been erected by Herod the Great. Here also was the influence of the Greek gods. Here also one would encounter worship of Caesar himself as a god. The world religions were on display in this town. It was with this scene in the background that Jesus chose to ask the most crucial questions of his ministry.¹

Surrounded by all sorts of religious possibilities, then, Jesus asks his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" The replies are typical of the Jewish thoughts of the day: Some say John the Baptist (indeed, some had thought that Jesus was a reincarnation of John the Baptist, who had been executed by Herod); others say Elijah (The Old Testament ends with a prophecy that Elijah will return to usher in the day of judgment); others say Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

But then came the more pointed question, the one aimed directly at the disciples: "But what about you?" Jesus asked. "Who do YOU say that I am?"² It's one thing to observe the views and opinions of the general public. But at some time or another, any person who has spent some time with Jesus will be expected to answer the question for himself or herself: Who do YOU say that I am? At some time or another, each of you who has spent some time with Jesus will be expected to formulate a confession of faith that proclaims what you believe about Jesus. At some time or another, any person who has spent some time with Jesus will be expected to 'fess up.

The text before us this morning is the most highly-discussed passage in all of Matthew. More than any other verses in the entire gospel, these verses before us this morning have generated reams and volumes of writings and discussions. That's because in our discipleship, there is no more critical time than the one in which we formulate for ourselves that which we believe concerning this person Jesus. There are three things this morning that I would like to highlight from this text, three things that this lesson teaches us about our confession of faith.

The first is that one's confession of faith need not be rushed. Too often in our society, pressure is applied to people who go to a church service or an evangelistic rally, for them to make a quick "decision" for Jesus as their Lord and Savior. You'll have some music, some personal testimonies to stir up your

emotions, maybe some preaching to give you a scare, and then within the hour, there will be pressure for people to make their own personal professions of faith.

Only, if you look at the way Jesus went about it with his own disciples, you'll find that he didn't push for a quick answer. This story comes well into the gospel, after the disciples have spent a significant amount of time with Jesus. They have been with him for the better part of three years. They have journeyed through the countryside with him. They have watched him perform miracles. They have listened to his teaching. They have seen him in conflict with the religious officials. It's only after the disciples have spent a significant amount of time with Jesus that Jesus then asks them what they believe concerning him. If Jesus did not expect his own followers to make a decision about who he was until they had spent a considerable amount of time with him, don't you think we should follow a similar model in our own evangelism methods? You see, I believe that Jesus wants more than for us to say the right words. He wants us to know him, and to allow our knowledge of him to inform our faith in him. The first thing this story teaches us is that one's confession of faith ought to be reached after we've spent some time getting to know who Jesus is.

The second thing this story teaches us is that there is a right answer. When Jesus looks to his disciples for their answer, Peter declares, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."³

Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Did you know that there are people who believe that Jesus' last name is Christ? The truth is, Christ is a title, not a surname. Christ is the Greek translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah. Jesus is the Christ, the Messiah. And Messiah means "Anointed One". In Old Testament theology, the Messiah is the one who is anointed as the ultimate, the final King of heaven and earth. The Messiah is the king that God will send to rule the world with righteousness and justice.

Dale Bruner is a Presbyterian minister and Bible teacher at Whitworth College in Washington state. In his discussion of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Christ, he sought to find a contemporary way to describe what it means for Jesus to be called the Christ. He found his example in a church in the Philippines. "In downtown Manila there was once a large Pentecostal church with a huge sign on the roof that dominated the skyline, from which that church got its name: the 'Christ Is the Answer' church. 'Christ is the Answer'; that church's unusual name is an excellent modern definition of our key term: the word 'Christ' means ... 'the Answer.' Here is Peter's Confession in modern English: 'You are the Answer, the Point, the Last Word, the Meaning. You are It.'"⁴

When Peter said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," he was saying to Jesus, "You are the ultimate One. You are the One for whom we have been waiting all our lives. You are the One in whom all our hopes are fulfilled. You are the Answer."

And that was the answer that Jesus was looking for. He praises Peter for his answer, and he declares that it is that kind of faith that will serve as the foundation on which Jesus' church will be built. You see, there is a right answer to the question of who Jesus is. Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. Jesus is the ultimate One. Jesus is the One in whom all our hopes are fulfilled.

And once we have come to the realization that Jesus is the One, that Jesus is the Christ, then it takes the rest of our lives to understand what that truly means. Just because Peter boldly stated, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God," doesn't mean that he fully understood everything that entailed. In fact, just following this episode, Peter will demonstrate his failure to understand that the Christ must suffer in order to truly be the Christ.

How we understand Jesus to be the Christ will take a lifetime to work out. But it's more than just one thing. Jesus is not just a teacher, or just a compassionate human being, or just a radical prophet. Jesus is all that, and more. In just a few moments, we will recite together an affirmation of faith that comes from the Brief Statement of Faith in our Book of Confessions. In that portion of the affirmation, we will declare that Jesus is

... fully human, fully God. Jesus proclaimed the reign of God: preaching good news to the poor and release to the captives, teaching by word and deed and blessing the children, healing the sick and binding up the brokenhearted, eating with outcasts, forgiving sinners, and calling all to repent and believe the gospel.

... Jesus was crucified, suffering the depths of human pain and giving his life for the sins of the world. God raised Jesus from the dead, vindicating his sinless life, breaking the power of sin and evil, delivering us from death to life eternal.⁵

Even that statement doesn't say it all. It takes a lifetime of faith to let the reality of who Jesus is sink in, to come to an understanding of what it means that Jesus is the Christ.

Finally, our confession of Jesus as the Christ is the basis for our proclamation as his church. Jesus blesses Peter for his confession, and he then hands Peter the keys to the kingdom. Catholics have traditionally looked at this passage as an endorsement of apostolic succession for the papacy; Protestants have focused on the *confession* more than the person of Peter as the basis for the building up of the Church of Jesus Christ. The truth is, one cannot say that Jesus does not call Peter the rock on which the church will be built. But neither can one claim that Jesus says Peter *and all his successors* are the rock...

But beyond the argument of whether or not a formal succession of church leaders from the line of Peter is critical, is the indisputable fact that Jesus has entrusted His church with the proclamation of the gospel that Jesus is the Christ, that Jesus is the Answer. We are given the keys, which means that we have the power to open the doors of the kingdom for other people. Even more, we have the *responsibility* of opening doors of the kingdom, that all may enter in, that all may proclaim Jesus as the Christ.

Don't you see, if Jesus Christ came to show us who God is, in the same way, it is up to the church of Jesus Christ to show the world who Jesus is.

As people see the church of Jesus Christ in this world, who would they say Jesus is? Would they say that Jesus came to set the captives free, or to feed the hungry, or to clothe the naked? Would they say that Jesus cares for the lonely and the outcast? Would they say that Jesus loves the little children--red and yellow, black and white? Would they say that Jesus has compassion for the poor and the needy?

When people see the church of Jesus Christ, who would they say that Jesus is?

When people see Jesus in Georgetown Presbyterian Church, who would they say Jesus is?

You see, Jesus has given us a tremendous responsibility, to proclaim him faithfully and truthfully to the world, to invite all people in his name to come and know him, that they may see him as the Christ, the Son of the Living God. The truth is, the keys work both ways; either we can open the doors of the kingdom

by our faithful proclamation of the gospel, or we will lock people out by a proclamation that is other than Christ.

For many people, the only thing they will ever learn about Jesus is what they observe through Christians relating to the world. If we are warm and friendly and loving, then that is how they will perceive Jesus. If we are contentious and hostile, then that is how they will perceive Jesus. There is an old poem that states our calling so very eloquently. It's called, "The Gospel According to You." The first two stanzas go like this:

**You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day,
By deeds that you do, by words that you say.
People read what you write, whether faithless or true.
Say, what is the gospel according to you?**

**People read and admire the gospel of Christ,
With its love so unending and true;
But what do they say, and what do they think
Of the gospel according to you?**

There comes a time when every one of us is called to answer the question, Who do you say that Jesus is? And it is incumbent upon us as the church of Jesus Christ to proclaim his gospel. When people look at us, who will they say that Jesus is? What is the gospel according to you?

¹ This introduction to Caesarea Philippi came from an e-mail newsletter I receive every week from illustrations@clergy.net

² Matthew 16:15

³ Matthew 16:16

⁴ Dale Bruner, Matthew: A Commentary, vol 2, "The Churchbook: Matthew 13-28", Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004, p. 122.

⁵ Brief Statement of Faith, Book of Confessions, PC(USA)