

Recognizing the Christ: Getting It Right (Part 1)

Daniel 7:13-14
Matthew 16:13-19

“Who is Jesus?” is a personal question.

A sermon preached by
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There is a great string of mountains that stretch from the northernmost tip of North America to the southernmost tip of South America. It is called the Great Divide, or the Continental Divide. Rain that falls on the western side of the divide flows to the Pacific Ocean. Rain that falls on the eastern side in the continental United States flows to the Mississippi River. It defines those great geographic areas called watersheds. I guess in theory, you could dump a bucket of water out precisely on the continental divide, and half of it would flow to the Pacific, and half would flow to the Mississippi. Maybe I'll try that sometime.

Often we refer to an event that changes the course of history for a person or a group as a watershed event. The invention of the printing press, the intercontinental railroad, the first radio broadcast, the first man on the moon, the internet—these and more are all watershed events. With these events, the story changed; things would never be the same again.

The confession of Peter is often called the watershed of the Gospel. William Barclay calls it “the great discovery.”¹ It is the singular event that turned the story. Before Peter's confession, Jesus was an itinerant preacher in Galilee. After the confession, the story began to flow toward Jerusalem and Jesus' confrontation with the authorities and his crucifixion, death, and resurrection. It also forms a literary turning point in the Synoptic gospels. Our summer walk through the Gospel of Matthew has brought us to this point, so I want to spend two weeks on this watershed event and examine the story piece by piece.

First, let's notice the place. Matthew identifies it as Caesarea Philippi. It was a Roman city built to honor Caesar by Philip, the appointed king of the region. It was about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. But its history was much deeper than Rome. Before the Romans came, there was a Greek temple to their god Pan, the god of nature. Before that it was a holy place for the Syrians. So there were three layers of civilization and gods attached to this place. The reason Caesarea Philippi seemed like a holy place was a cave

in the side of the mountain there. It is usually filled with water (it was when I saw it), but ancient people could not find the bottom of the reservoir of water. So they thought the cave led all the way to the underworld. They called the cave the “Gates of Hades.” Make a mental note.

Out of this same mountain, there is a giant spring that forms the headwaters of the Jordan River, which is the lifeline for that entire region. So this is an important location, and the perfect backdrop for Jesus to ask his questions.

Passing by this mountain with the statues of Greek and Roman gods everywhere, in the midst of all this diversity, he asked his disciples, “*Who do people say that the Son of Man is?*”² Jesus often referred to himself as the Son of Man. What does this mean? It was a title taken from that verse in the Book of Daniel that we read, “*I saw one like a Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven.*”³ It meant a human being, but also a human being with a connection to God, more than just your everyday prophet or rabbi.

That question was worthy of discussion. It still is. People are still arguing two millennia later about the nature of Jesus Christ. Was he God? Was he human? Was he both? How important is he?

Forty-five years ago, astrophysicist and amateur historian Michael Hart published a controversial book called *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History*.⁴ It was controversial for several reasons, foremost being that Jesus came in third, behind Sir Isaac Newton (who was actually a follower of Jesus), and the prophet Muhammad. However, except for Newton, five of the top six were religious figures: Muhammad, Jesus, Buddha, Confucius, and Paul. Among all the religious figures in human history, where does Jesus fit in?

The disciples had heard several rumors. Maybe Jesus was John the Baptist come back to life after Herod had killed him. Maybe Jesus was Elijah come back, as the prophet Malachi had predicted, as a sign of the coming Messiah. Many people thought Jeremiah would return to herald the day of the Messiah as well. Maybe that’s who Jesus was. Notice that all the answers were about men who were signs of the coming Messiah. Nobody was willing to say Jesus was the one.

Until he asked the second question: “*But who do you say that I am?*”⁵ Now the question was personal. It did not matter what everyone else said. The disciples were the ones who knew Jesus best. Who did they say he was?

Simon was standing ready with the right answer: “*You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*”⁶ This seems so natural to our ears, but it was an earth-shattering revelation, even to Simon Peter. It had been foreshadowed on the boat when Jesus walked on water. They had all worshipped and said, “*Truly you are the Son of God.*”⁷ But that was in the heat of the moment. Now they were just standing there on the side of the road, and Peter drops this bomb: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” It sounded simple, but there were layers of meaning underneath it. Christ was the Greek word *Christos*, the translation of the Hebrew word for Messiah. Messiah meant “anointed one,” and it originally referred to kings and prophets who were literally anointed with oil before they began to function. The Messiah was also called the son of God. But over the years, Messiah had come to mean a Savior, one sent from God to redeem God’s people, to set things right. Only Matthew adds the phrase “Son of the living God.” This, too, made reference back to several places in the Hebrew Scriptures about the God of the Jews, who

was alive, as opposed to the idols of the heathens, which were handmade and had no life in them.

From deep in their tradition, from deep in their bones, the disciples knew this was the right answer. In the final analysis, it's the only answer that matters.

Dr. M. Scott Peck was a psychiatrist and best-selling author with his self-help book *The Road Less Travelled* in the late 1970's. In it, he combined the insights of psychiatry and Christianity. In his second book, *The People of the Lie*, he talks about his answer to Jesus' question: "I referred to Jesus as my Lord. After many years of vague identification with Buddhist and Islamic mysticism, I ultimately made a firm Christian commitment, signified by my ...baptism on the ninth of March 1980, at the age of forty-three. ...My commitment to Christianity is the most important thing in my life and is, I hope, pervasive and total."⁸ A commitment to Christ cannot be second-hand, passed down through osmosis from your parents or grandparents or friends. It has to be personal.

Like with the story about Jesus walking on water, Matthew includes some more special material about Simon Peter in this text. When Jesus hears the right answer to the question, he responds, "*Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you but my Father in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"⁹

In these tightly packed words, there are three important ideas. First, the right answer did not come to Peter because he was smart. He didn't just figure it out. This was a revelation from God; Peter was just the mouthpiece.

Second, Jesus is so good with words. He makes two plays on words in one sentence! Peter (*Petros* in Greek) is a rock (*petra* in Greek), a rock of faith. This is one of the few puns that works in both Greek and Aramaic, the native language of Jesus. So Jesus nicknames him Rocky, and says he will be the foundation of his church, and the Gates of Hades will not prevail against him. They were probably standing within sight of the mysterious cave at Caesarea Philippi, and Jesus uses that reference to give Peter authority over the demonic forces of the underworld.

What Jesus is giving Peter is the keys to the kingdom of heaven. This is probably where we get the idea of St. Peter sitting at the pearly gates of heaven checking people in. But that's not what Jesus is talking about. Binding and loosing were terms the rabbis used for keeping order in the synagogue. Some things were forbidden (bound), and some things were allowed (loosed). As the early church would get going, Peter functioned as the chief rabbi for the new community of faith. He was the voice of authority, passed down from Jesus.

Think about Peter's story in the Book of Acts. His keys opened the door to salvation for thousands of people through the proclamation of the good news of Jesus—on the day of Pentecost, before the Jewish Council, in the home of Cornelius the Roman centurion. He used the keys Jesus had given him to loosen the restrictions on Gentiles, to open the doors to whoever would receive the gift of Christ.

Some of this story about Peter's confession and Jesus' charge are unique to Peter. He was the chief disciple; he was the great leader of the early church. He became the leader of the Roman church before he died a martyr's death by crucifixion. The Roman Catholic Church makes a big deal out of the primacy of Peter, and they believe his authority, given

by Jesus, was passed on to the later bishops of Rome, who eventually became the popes of the church, who still carry Peter's authority today. We Protestant Christians take a little different view. We see Peter as a great disciple and leader given special authority by Jesus, which he exercised in the first generation of the church. After that, God raises up leaders in every generation of the church to carry on God's work, even people like you and me.

What this story of Jesus and Peter means to us all depends on how we answer the question: "Who do *you* say that Jesus is? Who is he for you?" Is he a historical figure, the founder of a world religion, a teacher, a miracle worker, a role model? Or is Jesus your Lord, your Savior, the most important relationship in your life, your hope for eternal life? Do you know the right answer?

You may have been in and around the church for a long time and listened to years of Christian teaching, and still never answered the question. Walking into a church doesn't make you a Christian any more than walking into McDonald's makes you a hamburger. There has to come a point where you make a personal acceptance of Jesus as your Lord and commit your heart and soul to him.

This week we celebrated the life of Jerry Pruitt, who died after a short battle with cancer. Jerry was a great guy, successful in so many ways, and he had a good life. But shortly after he was diagnosed, I discovered an amazing fact. Jerry had never made a profession of faith. In fact, he was personally skeptical about Jesus. He would have debates with his daughters about faith. He came to church with Cyndi all the time; the family told me he liked my sermons and would comment on them. But he never took his faith to heart. In fact, he even made fun of people who would get to the end of their life and "come over" to Jesus' side at the last minute. When he got cancer, people started praying for Jerry. The discussions intensified. His cancer progressed much faster than anybody thought it would. Last Saturday night he was put into hospice care. Acknowledging that the end was near, he told Cyndi, "I'm ready to come over." They got all his daughters on the phone, and they prayed Jerry home. Last Sunday morning, he met the Savior he had just come to know. In the midst of their loss, what a joy and a comfort that gave to his family. As an attorney, Jerry had asked and answered many questions over his life, but he finally answered the one question that makes an eternal difference. And he got it right.

When we make the great discovery, as Barclay said, we are given a great privilege. We have the keys to the Kingdom of heaven. We are also given a great responsibility, because we have the keys to the kingdom of heaven. The key to the kingdom of heaven is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior. It's the gift we have to give to the world.

William Barclay ends his commentary on this text with these words: "Peter had made the great discovery; and Peter was given the great privilege and the great responsibility. It is a discovery which everyone must make for him [or her]self; and when [we have] made it, the same privilege and the same responsibility are laid upon [us]."¹⁰

We ask the question still. We ask it always. We ask it daily. Who do you say Jesus is? It's a personal question. How you answer it will determine the direction of your life and the inheritance of eternal life. It's a watershed moment, the continental divide of the heart. Who is Jesus for you? Get it right.

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew, Volume 2, Revised Edition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1975), 133.

² Matthew 16:13.

³ Daniel 7:13.

⁴ Michael J. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History, Revised Edition* (New York: Citadel, 2000).

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_100:_A_Ranking_of_the_Most_Influential_Persons_in_History.

⁵ Matthew 16:15.

⁶ Matthew 16:16.

⁷ Matthew 14:33.

⁸ M. Scott Peck, *The People of the Lie, 2nd edition* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 11.

⁹ Matthew 16:17-19.

¹⁰ Barclay, 146.