

The Supreme Confession

Matthew 16:13-17

2317

INTRODUCTION

Jesus asked His disciples, "Who say ye that I am?" (Matt. 16:15). That question is the apex of Matthew's gospel and the thesis of both the Old and New Testaments. For more than two years Christ had been establishing, affirming, and building His disciples' confidence and commitment until Peter, on behalf of all the disciples, could give this supreme confession: "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). That confession embodies the essence of true Christianity. Let's examine it more closely.

LESSON

I. THE SETTING (v. 13a)

"Jesus came into the borders of Caesarea Philippi. "

For some months Christ had secluded Himself from misguided multitudes who wanted to make Him a political ruler, from King Herod, who wanted to kill Him out of jealous ambition, and from the Jewish leaders, who viewed Him as a threat to their religious system. He used that time to personally instruct His twelve disciples about the cross and other important spiritual matters.

During that time of seclusion Christ and His disciples had gone north of Galilee to Caesarea Philippi. After praying, Christ walked with His disciples along a road between some of the suburban villages of Caesarea Philippi (Mark 8:27; Luke 9:18). As they walked along, Christ asked His disciples two questions.

II. THE EXAMINATION (vv. 13b-15)

"He asked His disciples, saying, Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am? And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist; some, Elijah; and others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. He saith unto them, But who say ye that I am?"

"Son of man" was the Lord's most common designation of Himself. Although it's a prophetic title referring to the Messiah (Dan. 7:13), Christ used it here as a sign of His identification with humanity.

Christ had been preaching, teaching, and doing miracles for over two years in revealing Himself to the world. In light of that self-revelation, it seems Christ's questions weren't for the purpose of finding out information because He already knew what everyone believed. Rather, Christ wanted to contrast the wrong opinions of the populace against what would be the true confession of His disciples.

A. The Wrong Answers

1. John the Baptist

In response to Christ's first question the disciples noted that many people mistook Christ for John the Baptist. Matthew 14 says, "Herod, the tetrarch, heard of the fame of Jesus, and said unto his servants, This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore mighty works do show forth themselves in him" (vv. 1-2). Those words represented popular opinion, not just Herod's. Herod had beheaded John the Baptist, who served as the forerunner of Christ, and now was afraid John had come back to spite him.

2. Elijah

Others thought Christ was the prophet Elijah. Many Jewish people expected Elijah to return to them prior to the Messiah's coming. That expectation was based on Malachi 4:5: "Behold, I will send you Elijah, the prophet, before the coming of the great and terrible day of the Lord."

3. Jeremiah

Still others thought Christ was the prophet Jeremiah. That popular opinion was based on a story about him in the Apocrypha (non-biblical writings). According to the legend, Jeremiah took the Ark of the Covenant and Altar of Incense out of the Temple to prevent their desecration during the Babylonian Captivity (2 Maccabees 2:1-7). The legend also says that Jeremiah would return to restore the Temple items prior to the establishment of the messianic kingdom.

Second Maccabees goes on to say that Jeremiah gave a golden sword to Judas Maccabeus, who used it in leading the Maccabean revolution against the Greeks (15:15-16). Because of those legends, the Jews in the days of Christ looked upon Jeremiah as a hero.

4. One of the prophets

The general opinion that Christ was one of the prophets was also a popular view. Maybe people thought Christ was the prophet Zephaniah because of His warm spirit of love, but we really have no way of knowing which prophets they were thinking of. A parallel account in Luke 9:19 says that some thought he was one of the old prophets risen again. That provided people with an erroneous explanation for the supernatural abilities of Christ.

All those wrong answers have this in common: the people thought Jesus was the forerunner of the Messiah, not the Messiah Himself. They attempted to explain His supernatural powers by concluding He was a prophet. Likewise, many today say Jesus was a great man, but they won't personally embrace Him as Savior and Lord.

B. The Right Answer

Having heard the wrong opinions of the general populace, Christ now wanted to hear what the disciples had to say. So He asked, "But who say ye that I am?" (v. 15). Peter's response (v. 16) was an official and formal confession for all the disciples. Peter often served as the spokesman for the Twelve (Matt. 15:15; 19:27; 26:35, 40-41; John 6:68). It seems he had the ability to articulate what the disciples were thinking as a group.

III. THE CONFESSION (v. 16)

"Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God."

The Greek term translated "Christ" means "Messiah" or "Anointed One." The confession of the disciples was decisive, emphatic, and brief: Christ is the Messiah. But what did the disciples believe about Christ during the early part of His ministry?

A. Initially

1. The disciples' affirmation of Christ

Initially the disciples acknowledged that Christ was the Messiah (cf. John 1:41). They believed the testimony of John the Baptist, who said, "Behold the Lamb of God, who taketh away the sin of the world. . . . I saw, and bore witness that [Christ] is the Son of God" (John 1:29, 34). The disciples' initial belief was strengthened by their firsthand observations of Christ's supernatural abilities (vv. 47-48). And if Christ had planned to destroy the Roman Empire and set up His own earthly kingdom, it is likely the disciples would have given Him their full allegiance.

2. The disciples' doubts about Christ

However, when Christ became the object of hatred, rejection, and humiliation, the disciples began to wonder if their initial affirmation about Christ was correct. Even John the Baptist, the forerunner of Christ, had some doubts about Christ's identity (Matt. 11:1-4).

During Christ's early ministry, the disciples had moments not only of great faith (cf. John 6:68) but also of little faith (cf. Matt. 8:26). To keep their faith from wavering, Christ realized the need for personally instructing them. So He did just that.

B. Later on

1. Christ is the Messiah

By the time of the account in Matthew 16 our Lord had been teaching His disciples for over two years. They had seen His miracles and heard His profound teaching. By this point they had a genuine belief that Christ was the Messiah. Although their understanding about His atoning work on the cross was incomplete, they recognized Christ to be the fulfillment of their hopes and the source of their salvation.

2. Christ is the Son of the living God

The Greek term translated "Son" speaks of essence, not servitude. By saying Christ is "the Son of the living God," the disciples were confessing that Christ is of the same essence as God. Christ Himself said He was equal with God (John 5:17-18). He is the "living God" as opposed to the dead idols that men vainly worship.

IV. THE SOURCE (v. 17)

"Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father, who is in heaven."

"Flesh and blood" is symbolic for humanness. "Simon" was Peter's name before his conversion, and Christ used it to point out the inadequacy and blindness of human reason in and of itself. It wasn't through human intellect or merit that Peter confessed Christ to be the Messiah. After all, "no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 12:3). Only God can reveal His Son to the human mind. Jesus said, "No man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, except the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him" (Matt. 11:27). Only by divine revelation can we know Christ.

As Christ personally instructed the disciples over a period of years, the Holy Spirit revealed to them that Christ was the Messiah. Today the Holy Spirit continues to reveal the Son to those who hear Christ's teaching in Scripture, for "faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). As you behold the glory of the Christ in Scripture, you'll be "changed into the same image from glory to glory, even as by the Spirit of the Lord" (2 Cor. 3:18).

V. THE EVIDENCE (v. 17)

Christ's words and works clearly reveal Him to be God.

A. The Words of Christ

1. Matthew 7:22--"Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord." Christ is the Lord of judgment.
2. Matthew 5:17--"Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets; I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill."

B. The Works of Christ

1. Matthew 8:3--"Jesus put forth his hand, and touched him, saying, I will; be thou clean. And immediately his leprosy was cleansed. " Here we see Christ's power over disease.
2. Matthew 8:26--Christ "rebuked the winds and the sea; and there was a great calm. " Here we see Christ's power over nature.
3. Matthew 8:32--Christ commanded demons to come out of two people. When the demons came out, they went into a herd of swine, which then plunged into the sea and drowned. Here we see Christ's power over demons.

4. Matthew 9:6--"That ye may know that the Son of man hath power on earth to forgive sins (then saith he to the sick of the palsy), Arise, take up thy bed, and go unto thine house. " This reveals Christ's power over sin.

5. Matthew 9:25--The daughter of a certain ruler lay dead. Christ went to her and "took her by the hand, and the maid arose. " This reveals Christ's power over death.

C. The Lordship of Christ

Recognizing Jesus as Lord gave the disciples a fuller understanding about His being the Messiah.

1. Stated

Christ said He was "Lord even of the sabbath day" (Matt. 12:8). That statement places Christ beyond the realm of John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or any other prophet. But to understand why, you need to know some things about the Sabbath.

Understanding the Sabbaths

The Sabbath, the seventh day of the week, was the center of life in Israel. In fact the Jewish religious calendar was set up in cycles of sevens. The Greek term translated "sabbath" means "rest" or "cessation. " Primarily the Sabbath was a time to rest from physical labor and worship God. There were many Sabbaths for the Jewish people to observe.

1. The weekly Sabbath (Lev. 23:1-3)

The Jewish people regarded Saturday as the seventh day of the week. Every Saturday the people rested from their work and gathered for worship. That day was patterned after God's rest from His work of creation (Ex. 20:8-11) and served as a reminder of God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt (Deut. 5:12-15).

2. The Passover (vv. 4-8)

On the fourteenth day of Nisan (the first month of the year in the Jewish religious calendar) a prescribed meal was eaten in commemoration of the first Passover in Egypt. A central feature of this holy observance was the slaying of an unblemished lamb. Immediately following the Passover, the Jewish nation observed the Feast of Unleavened Bread, in part by offering numerous sacrifices each day and also by setting aside the first and seventh days for rest and worship.

3. The Feast of Firstfruits (vv. 9-14)

This observance took place seven weeks following the Feast of Unleavened Bread, on the fiftieth day. Because it was closely associated with the agricultural harvest, it is also called the Feast of Harvest. This was a one-day observance. No work was allowed and numerous offerings were made.

4. The Feast of Trumpets (vv. 23-25)

This feast took place on the seventh month of the Jewish religious calendar. There was much trumpet blowing and many animal sacrifices.

5. The Day of Atonement (vv. 26-32)

This was observed on the tenth day of the seventh month. Only on this day did the high priest enter the Holy of Holies, symbolizing the necessity of atonement for sin. No person was to work, and all were to fast.

6. The Feast of Tabernacles (vv. 33-43)

During this feast the Jewish people lived in tents or booths (made of tree branches) in commemoration of Israel's manner of life during the wilderness journey from Egypt. The feast began in the seventh month of the religious calendar.

7. The Sabbath year (25:1-7)

Every seven years the people were to refrain from working their land or pruning their vines. The yield from the land was to be shared with the poor, servants, and visitors.

8. The Year of Jubilee (vv. 8-55)

After seven consecutive sabbatical years (forty-nine years), a special yearlong Jubilee was observed. The land was to lie fallow once again. During the year, lost inheritances were restored, slaves who so wished were set free, and former property could either be repurchased or automatically returned.

The Sabbaths were symbolic of the rest and holiness salvation brings through Christ. Just as the Old Testament sacrifices pointed to the Lamb of God, so also the whole sabbath system pointed to Christ, who gives ultimate rest and holiness.

2. Illustrated

Christ "came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet, Isaiah. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. . . . And [Christ] began to say unto them, This day is this Scripture fulfilled in your ears" (Luke 4:16-19, 21; cf. Isa. 61:1-2).

In reading Isaiah's prophecy Christ was saying, "I am the true Sabbath rest, the One who proclaims a spiritual Jubilee by freeing sinners from bondage to sin." That's why Christ said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Through His atoning work on the cross, Christ inaugurated a new covenant, which did away with the sabbatical system (Col. 2:16-17). The righteous have entered Christ's salvation rest and look forward to ultimate rest in His presence (Heb. 4:9-11).

VI. THE RESULT (v. 17)

"Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-jonah."

The Lord's blessing is the bestowal of all His divine resources on the righteous. The righteous are blessed "with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). If you truly confess Christ as the Messiah, the Son of the living God, and embrace Him as your own, you will enjoy His eternal and holy rest.

Focusing on the Facts

1. Why did Christ occasionally seek seclusion from the crowds (see p. 2)?
2. What does "Son of Man" in Matthew 16:13 mean (see p. 2)?
3. Why did Christ question His disciples (see p. 2)?
4. What was the opinion of King Herod and many others about Christ (see pp. 2-3)?
5. Why did many think Christ was the prophet Jeremiah (see p. 3)?
6. What did all the wrong opinions have in common? How do those opinions compare with people's thinking today (see p. 4)?
7. What did the Twelve think about Christ during the early part of His ministry (see p. 4)?
8. How did Christ help keep the disciples' faith from wavering (see p. 5)?
9. What does "the Son of the living God" mean (Matt. 16:16; see p. 5)?
10. Why did Christ address Peter as "Simon" in verse 17 (see p. 5)?
11. How did God reveal Christ to the Twelve? How does He reveal His Son today (see p. 6)?
12. What do the words and works of Christ reveal (see p. 6)?
13. Why did the Jewish people rest from their work (Lev. 23:1-3; see p. 7)?
14. What did the Sabbaths symbolize (see p. 9)?

15. What was the significance of Christ's reading from Isaiah 61 (see p. 9)?

16. What specific blessing does the Lord bestow on the righteous (Eph. 1:3; see p. 9)?

Pondering the Principles

1. Christ is the true Sabbath rest. The salvation rest believers experience in Christ has been captured in Fanny Crosby's "Safe in the Arms of Jesus":

Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on His gentle breast,

There by His love o'ershaded, sweetly my soul shall rest.

Hark! 'tis the voice of angels, borne in a song to me,

Over the field of glory, over the jasper sea.

Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe from corroding care,

Safe from the world's temptations, sin cannot harm me there.

Free from the blight of sorrow, free from my doubts and fears;

Only a few more trials, only a few more tears!

Jesus, my heart's dear refuge, Jesus has died for me;

Firm on the Rock of Ages, ever my trust shall be.

Here let me wait with patience, wait till the night is o'er;

Wait till I see the morning break on the golden shore.

Safe in the arms of Jesus, safe on His gentle breast,

There by His love o'ershaded, sweetly my soul shall rest.

Christ said, "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Have you accepted the salvation rest Christ offers? If Christ is your Savior, thank and praise Him for the salvation rest He has given you.

2. On the Day of Pentecost Peter preached that God made Jesus "both Lord and Christ" (Acts 2:36). Peter willingly confessed Christ before others. Christ said, "Whosoever, therefore, shall confess me before men, him will I confess also before my Father, who is in heaven" (Matt. 10:32). Telling the lost about Christ is a mark of the true believer. Are you a witness for Christ? Be involved in the lives of your family, neighbors, and co-workers so they can hear and see Christ.

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