

1.

Who Do You Say that I Am?

As he neared the end of the long walk to Caesarea Philippi, Jesus stopped along the side of the road. His disciples were with him for the journey, but at this instant, he had a moment alone and decided to take the opportunity to pray. It was a common occurrence during his often-arduous ministry that he would refresh himself through these moments of fellowship with God.

In recent days, he had healed a deaf man,^a restored sight to a blind man,^b and fed several thousand people with just a few pieces of bread and fish.^c Though he had amazed the crowds around the Sea of Galilee by performing these incredible miracles, he still faced

^a Mark 7:31-37.

^b Mark 8:22-26.

^c Matthew 15:29-39; Mark 8:1-10.

great opposition in his ministry. The crowds in general still did not understand who he was, and the religious leaders rejected his claims outright. Ignoring the way that he demonstrated the power of God by his teaching and his miracles, the Pharisees had been demanding a better sign that would satisfy them.^d He had refused to perform on their command, promising them that they would see nothing “except the sign of Jonah”^e—invoking the Old Testament prophet who had been as good as dead for three days before being delivered up from his aquatic grave.^f

When his disciples rejoined him there at the roadside, he addressed the problem of unbelief and made this a teachable moment for them.

“Who do the crowds say that I am?”^g Jesus asked his disciples.

“John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, that one of the ancient prophets has come back,”^h the group responded.

The disciples had heard many theories through the grapevine. Indeed, there were people who thought Jesus was John the Baptist—despite the fact that the two had been seen together in public on multiple occasions.ⁱ Others thought Jesus might have really been Elijah, Jeremiah, or another Old Testament prophet who had come back from the dead. The disciples were quick to point out the abundance of opinions floating around out in the community.

But Jesus was not satisfied with their second-hand accounts of what *others* believed. Simply parroting others’ opinions required no

^d Matthew 16:1-6; Mark 8:11-13.

^e Matthew 16:4, CSB.

^f Cf. Matthew 12:40; Jonah 1:1—2:10.

^g Luke 9:18, CSB.

^h Luke 9:19, CSB.

ⁱ Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 9:1-11; Luke 3:21-22; John 1:29-36.

courage or commitment on their part. Instead, Jesus called on them to account for their *own* convictions. He looked at his disciples and asked them a question that still plagues people today.

“But *you*, who do *you* say that I am?”^j he asked, emphasizing the importance of *their* personal convictions.

Peter eventually summoned the courage to answer first. He told Jesus, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”^k

This was a revolutionary confession! In calling Jesus the Messiah, Peter had identified him as Israel’s long-awaited Savior, the one who had been promised throughout centuries of Old Testament history. However, Peter had gone a step even further than that. While many were looking for a human Messiah, an earthly leader who would drive the Romans out and usher in a new golden age to Israel, Peter said *this* Messiah was no mere man—he was the Son of God!

I have often wondered how the others reacted to what Peter said. Did they immediately agree with his declaration? Did they stand there, mouths agape, shocked at what Peter had just said? Did they sheepishly wait to see Jesus’ reaction, not knowing what to say? The Bible does not tell us how they reacted; it only tells us how Jesus reacted, because his reaction tells us everything we need to know about Peter’s confession.

How did Jesus react? Jesus *confirmed* what Peter had said. He said, “Blessed are you [...] because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.”^l

^j Luke 9:20, CSB, italics added for emphasis.

^k Matthew 16:16, CSB.

^l Matthew 16:17, CSB.

When Peter recognized Jesus as God's Son and Israel's Messiah, Jesus expressed no surprise about it. Instead, he said that Peter knew this truth *only* because the Father had revealed it to him.^m Peter's confession reflected God's truth.

The question that Jesus asked his disciples there on the road to Caesarea Philippi still echoes down through the ages to confront us today. Just like in Jesus' day, our day has no shortage of opinions offered in response. But just like the disciples who were called to account for their own convictions, each of us must wrestle with the question personally and pin down the answer of what we believe about Jesus Christ.

Understanding Christology

Throughout this book, we will explore the subject of Christology. For many of us, big words that end in -ology can cause us to lose interest and let our minds wander. But Christology is not some abstract, irrelevant academic discussion best left entirely to pastors and theologians. Christology, at its simplest, is what a person believes about Jesus Christ.

You may not have even realized it, but *you* have a Christology already. What *you* believe about Jesus Christ is *your* Christology, and your Christology directly affects the way you relate to him and his teachings every day.

For example, if your Christology were that he was just a wise human teacher, you would have no problem in selectively following his teachings. You could easily embrace his teaching on turning the

^m Matthew 16:17.

other cheekⁿ while rejecting his teaching on divorce^o as being outdated. And if he was simply a wise thinker about morality and ethics like Confucius or Immanuel Kant, that would be a sensible approach.

But it is a far different situation if your Christology is that he is the Son of God. At that point, what would have otherwise been just insightful advice becomes a divine command. It would no longer be reasonable for you to pick and choose which teachings to embrace or reject on the basis of your subjective feelings. If you really believe that he is the Son of God, you will try to follow *everything* he taught (even though you fall short in your efforts).

What we believe about Jesus Christ determines how we respond to Jesus Christ.

Can't We All Just Love Jesus?

Some may still believe that Christology is unimportant. "Doctrine doesn't matter," they will say, "as long as we all love Jesus." I have heard statements like that in church a number of times in my ministry. I suspect most pastors who have been serving for at least five minutes have heard a statement like it.

Sometimes people can be uncomfortable with teaching that draws too sharp a contrast with other teachings, because they feel like it unnecessarily divides people. They conclude that we should not worry about people's religious beliefs, because the only thing that matters is whether or not we love Jesus.

ⁿ Matthew 5:39; Luke 6:29.

^o Matthew 19:9; Mark 10:11-12.

There are a couple of problems with this philosophy. First, Jesus said we demonstrate our love for him through obedience to him. He said, “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word.”^p In the next verse, he said, “The one who doesn’t love me will not keep my words.”^q That means there is much, much more to loving Jesus than a warm, fuzzy feeling toward him. It means that we show our love by believing and practicing the truth he taught: his *doctrine*.

Then there is a second problem with this philosophy: if the only thing that matters is loving Jesus, then which Jesus are we to love?

That too is a doctrinal issue. Not everyone who expresses affection for Jesus is talking about the *same* Jesus. Take Mohandas Gandhi, the great hero of Indian independence, for example.

Gandhi is widely quoted in the West as having said, “I love your Christ. It is just that so many of you Christians are so unlike your Christ,” but the authenticity of this quote has not been verified. Nevertheless, Gandhi was known to have expressed affection and admiration for Jesus. On one occasion, Gandhi wrote that Jesus had “endeared” himself to him.¹ So, Gandhi loved Jesus, but the Jesus whom Gandhi loved looks very different from the Jesus that most Christians would recognize.

Describing the Jesus he loved, Gandhi wrote, “I regard Jesus as a great teacher of humanity, but I do not regard him as the only begotten son of God.”² He also wrote:

I may say that I have never been interested in a historical Jesus. I should not care if it was proved by someone that the man called Jesus never lived, and that what was narrated in the Gospels was a figment of the writer’s imagination. For the Sermon on the Mount would still be true for me.³

^p John 14:23, CSB.

^q John 14:24, CSB.

Speaking of the virgin birth, Gandhi wrote, “I should find it hard to believe in the literal meaning of the verses relating to the immaculate conception of Jesus.”⁴ And of miracles, he wrote, “The miracles said to have been performed by Jesus, even if I had believed them literally, would not have reconciled me to any teaching that did not satisfy universal ethics.”⁵ In summary, he wrote, “Jesus then, to me, is a great world teacher among others. He was, to the devotees of His generation, no doubt ‘the only begotten son of God.’ Their belief need not be mine.”⁶

The Jesus whom Gandhi loved was not the only begotten Son of God. He was an ordinary human, born by ordinary means, who became a great moral teacher, but never demonstrated the power of God through his miraculous works. For that matter, he may not even have existed outside the fevered imagination of some deceiver who fabricated the Gospel accounts.

The philosophy that one’s beliefs do not matter as long as we all love Jesus assumes—incorrectly—that we all love *the same Jesus*. But we do not. The Jesus I love is not Gandhi’s Jesus. People still have many different ideas of who Jesus is, and telling these Jesuses apart requires us to consider carefully the doctrine of Christology and answer for ourselves Jesus’ vital question: *Who do you say that I am?*