

## Rocky Confession

According to Matthew, Jesus puts an unavoidable question to his followers at Caesarea Philippi, a question you and I must answer as well. **“Who do you say that I am?”** Not “What are other people saying about me?” or “Where do I rank in the opinion polls?” But **“Who do you say that I am?”**

Before we explore the answer, I want to point out that Jesus is not asking each of his disciples to speak for himself. This would be so much clearer if only the translators of the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible had all been born south of the Mason-Dixon line. Jesus doesn't ask, “Who does each of you say that I am; give me your opinion.” He asks, “Who do *y'all* say that I am?” In King James parlance, he asks “Who do *ye yourselves* say that I am?”

You and I answer that question every Sunday when we stand to recite the Creed:

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God . . .

That's glorious language. I get chills almost every time I say it. Not because it's the language I would use when talking to somebody on a flight from Tallahassee to Atlanta, but because it's language that has been handed down through the centuries. It's “body speak,” “corporate talk,” the language used by an assembly whose membership transcends the boundaries of time and space.

Peter answers Jesus' question, but when he does, he's is not speaking merely for himself. He's offering the first building block of a creed. He's speaking for the community of those who follow Jesus.

**“Who do y'all say that I am?”**

**“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

Please notice two things about Peter's famous confession at Caesarea Philippi: *First*, he doesn't make this confession on his own. He has help – lots of it. *Second*, compared to what he'll be learning in the rest of Matthew's Gospel, Peter barely knows what he's talking about.

First, he's not on his own. Jesus is delighted by Peter's answer, but he doesn't give him much personal credit for it, does he? **“Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”**

Peter gets an “A” for orthodoxy, but not necessarily for critical thinking. His faith is a gift, not an achievement. **“Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”**

Hundreds, perhaps thousands, of other people saw Jesus do the same things Peter saw, and heard Jesus say the same words Peter heard, but few of them shared Peter's confession. I can't tell you why that should be. I can only tell you that the Bible is very consistent about this matter of faith. According to the Bible, faith is a gift.

The Apostle Paul, who took faith very, very seriously, scolded Christians when they got all puffed up about their personal faith. To a group within the Corinthian church, he wrote, **“What do you have that you did not receive? And if you received it, why do you boast as if it were not a gift?”** (Cor. 4:7).

For Christians, faith is a source of gratitude, but never of pride. *Good for you, Simon! You're one of the blessed ones, but don't be getting swelled up about it. Your faith is a gift, just like the faith of every believer.*

Second, please notice, Peter still has a lot to learn. He has used the proper theological language. He has called Jesus **“the Messiah, (in Greek, the Christ) the Son of the living God.”** His creed, so far as it goes, is theologically perfect. If he were taking the Faith FCAT (Don't laugh! It might be on the way!) the computer would have given him full credit.

- Jesus is
- (a) John the Baptist
  - (b) Elijah
  - (c) some other prophet
  - (d) the Christ

Peter's creed is rock solid. Solid enough for Jesus to declare that he is willing to build his church upon it. But that does not mean that Peter or any of the other disciples has a very clear notion of what Jesus must do to be the Messiah, or where they will have to go to follow him.

*That is the stuff of next week's Gospel reading, and I don't want to steal Matthew's thunder. Suffice it to say that Peter still has a lot to learn. He might have passed the FCAT, but he's a long way from graduation.*

If you read the rest of Matthew's Gospel, you'll discover that, as a foundational character, Peter leaves a lot to be desired. On the sea of Galilee, he jumps out of the boat in an impressive show of faith, but soon sinks like the rock for which he is nicknamed. He swears his allegiance to Jesus in the upper room, but faced with arrest in the courtyard of the high priest a few hours later, he denies the two of them have ever met.

“Simon, I'm changing your name,” Jesus tells him after hearing that characteristically bold confession. “From now on, **you are Peter** (*petros*, rock) **and upon this rock I will build my church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.**”

We might be forgiven for thinking that Jesus is putting an awful lot of eggs into a very flimsy basket. The solid ground upon which **Christ the Son of the living God** undertakes to build his church looks a lot like sinking sand.

But the church, thank God, is not built upon Peter's sterling character or his penchant for following through. It's built on the gift of faith. Peter's faith at this moment wouldn't support a grass hut, much less a gothic cathedral, but it's a start. And that's all that's needed to build the church of Jesus Christ.

### **Who do y'all say that I am?**

Perhaps Jesus is not so much interested in hearing an orthodox reply as he is in hearing an honest one, a reply that is rooted in the grace we have received thus far. Perhaps Jesus would have been just as delighted if Peter, like the father of that little boy in Mark's Gospel, had said “**Lord, I believe; help my unbelief!**” (Mk. 9:24).

There's a good deal of solid rock beneath a confession like that.

Some Christians, especially the loudest ones with the greatest access to the air waves, seem to think that anybody who doesn't stand with Peter at Caesarea Philippi and profess faith in Jesus in precisely the same way as Peter, is going straight to hell. For them, the church is founded not so much on *faith* like that of Peter's as on *certainty* that Peter has said everything that needs to be said about Jesus, once and for all.

Peter's own story suggests that there are times when certainty can be the enemy of faith. Jesus celebrates Peter's faith, which is another way of saying that he celebrates the faith of the church, but he immediately challenges Peter to move beyond the boundaries, to follow him where the Messiah is not supposed to go.

It's much the same for us. The faith *that* Jesus is the Christ is a gift to be received and celebrated. *How* he is the Christ we must learn by following him. As Paul puts it: “. . . **now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known**” (I Cor. 13:12).

Peter Hawkins teaches religion at Boston University. In an article that appeared in the *Christian Century*, he recounts the embarrassing experience of being attacked by liberal, free-thinking friends for being a professing Christian.

“*What?* his friends told him. “You *admit* you’re a church-going Christian! You mean, you think everybody else is wrong? You really think Jesus was born of a virgin? You think he’s the only son of God? You think he’s ‘in’ the bread and wine? How intolerant can you get!”

Dr. Hawkins tried, as I have occasionally done, when similarly attacked at dinner parties or on transcontinental flights with no hope of retreat, to explain that these matters are extremely complicated. He failed to convince them, he reports. (I know the feeling.) But then he makes his own confession of faith. He writes,

. . . I confess that Jesus is the Son of God, the bread of heaven, but I would never tell someone else that his or her religion was false. I affirm week by week that Jesus was born of the Virgin Mary but also understand my friend’s incredulity at such an affirmation. I cannot explain Christ’s presence in the Eucharist; I only know that I cannot imagine my life without that bread and wine, or apart from the church that continues to keep the feast. I live, in other words, in a mess of imprecision, on the edge of the land, between sea and sky.

But if anyone were to ask me if I would care to simplify my muddle by walking away from it, then I would repeat the words that Simon Peter spoke (in John’s Gospel) when he, too, was given the chance to skip out. “**Lord, to whom can we go?**” . . . (*Christian Century*, August 9, 2005 p. 19).

### **Who do y’all say that I am?**

We answer that question best when we answer from the midst of the assembly gathered round bath, book, and table. Our answer will not be complete, or even fully informed, but it will suffice for following Jesus. And this much is solid as a rock: Christ is building his church upon the faith we have received thus far.