

Who Defines Christ?

We have caller ID on our phones; and it's for a reason. I normally don't answer unless I recognize the name or the number on the screen. I'm just tired of hearing, "Hi! This is Rachel from cardholder services!" I've asked to be taken off their calling list, and they've said they'd do it; but, I still get the calls.

BTW, when did daily harassment become effective as a marketing strategy?

So, I normally I wouldn't have answered the phone; but, for some unknown reason, I did that time. "May I speak with Jimmy Robinson?" I said, "This is he."

At that point, the caller's voice took on a sharp edge. "I'm calling you from the Acme Collection Agency. You owe Sears a significant amount of money and you have bills that are long past due; and we intend to collect."

I was caught totally off guard. I haven't had a Sears account for years! Somehow, I managed to sputter, "I don't know what you're talking about." "Sure you do, Mr. Robinson," he replied, "or, if you don't, your wife certainly does. Maybe you need to have a talk with her about your credit cards."

I bit my tongue; but managed to respond, "Listen, I don't even have a Sears account." "Did you previously live in Oklahoma?" "Yes; twenty-six years ago." "Is your address such-and-such?" "No." The voice softened a bit, and it turns out, someone else named Jimmy Robinson had moved from Oklahoma to Conway; and, it was he who owed Sears a lot of money. The collection agency had my name right, but they had my identity wrong.

Here's another situation of having the right name, but the wrong identity:

<p>MATTHEW 16:21-28 NRSV) <i>From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. ²²And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you." ²³But he</i></p>	<p><i>turned and said to Peter, "Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things." ²⁴Then Jesus told his disciples, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ²⁵For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."</i></p>
--	---

The verses leading up to today's text, Jesus has been teaching, healing, debating with religious leaders; crowds following him around. He was a celebrity. And celebrities, then as now, become objects of rumor and speculation—tabloid kind of stuff—National Inquirer.

And Jesus wanted to know what the disciples were hearing. "Who do people say that I am?" They told him about rumors circulating: He was a reincarnated hero or religious leader of days gone by: Elijah; John the Baptist...

"But, who do you say that I am?" When you talk about other people's views, you can judge, renounce or commend from a safe distance. You can play at being objective, even superior. And if a position is controversial, it's no skin off your nose.

That safety evaporates when we take responsibility for our own words—our own actions—our own lives. "Who do you say that I am?"

Jesus didn't ask, "Do you accept my teachings?" "Do you think I manage conflict with the authorities well?" "Are you impressed by my miracles?" The question is not about philosophy or behavior; it's about identity: "Who do you say that I am?"

Peter answered, "You're the Christ, the Son of the Living God." We call it the "good confession." With obvious joy, Jesus affirms: "Peter, you didn't learn that from the rumor-mill or tabloids or your superior insight and reasoning. This knowledge isn't the product of human intellect; it's a gift from God."

In I Corinthians, Paul writes, "No one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Spirit of God" (1 Corinthians 12:3). The "good confession" is inspired speech. Apparently, Peter's reach exceeded his grasp; he confessed more than he understood.

I remember two math teachers in high school. Their teaching methods were quite different. If I hit a snag in working out a geometry problem, I'd take it to Mr. Agnew. He'd say, "Give me your pencil." And he'd work out the problem and hand it back to me and say, "That's the way you do it." I did that twice on the final exam, and made a B in Plane Geometry; but, the only thing I remember is "the shortest distance between two points is a straight line," and "the square of the hypotenuse is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides of a right triangle."

In contrast, if I had trouble with an Algebra problem, I'd take it to Mr. Urbanoski, and he'd say, "Start working the problem, and show me where your trouble is." And he'd have me tell him, out loud, each step and why I was doing what I was doing. As often as not, by working through it verbally, I'd end up solving the problem without him saying a word.

I also made a B in Algebra; but, I still can do quadratic equations. One teacher focused on the answer; the other teacher focused on the process—the formula—by which the answer is determined.

IT IS POSSIBLE TO HAVE THE RIGHT ANSWER AND NOT HAVE A CLUE WHAT IT MEANS. Peter made the good confession; but, as for understanding what it meant, his formula was incomplete. He was missing a step in the process.

Peter thought he already knew what it meant to be the Christ. After all, on party of rabbis had taught for 600 years what the Christ would be like: He would be God's answer to the brokenness of humanity—the one who would lead God's broken world back into unity with its creator. That much was true.

What Peter missed was the method—the formula—by which Christ would achieve God's purpose. Christ WOULD right the wrongs of the world; but, not by glorious military dominance. The formula was not to out-evil the enemy, but to overcome evil with good—through self-denying, sacrificial love, even of the enemy, even when to do so would result in apparent defeat and humiliating death.

A beat up, hung up, dead and buried Christ was not what Peter meant when he confessed, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God."

So when, shortly after Peter's confession, Jesus began to speak of His suffering to come, Peter found it unbearable. He pulled Jesus aside and tried to straighten him out. "Jesus, you can't go around talking like that! Messiahs don't talk like that!" Of course, Peter meant well. But Jesus' response was swift and sharp. "Get behind me, Satan!" He called him Satan!

Peter was only the first of many who have rightly named Jesus "the Christ, the Son of the Living God," and then offered definitions of the Christ that have little to do with what God intends. And, how we define Christ makes all the difference in the world with how we follow him.

If we define Christ strictly as a teacher, then all we need to do is tune-up our intellect and learn his lessons. If Christ is a political revolutionary, intent on overthrowing unjust powers, then we need to take up arms and let the shooting begin. If Christ is a harmless, caring guy, then we need to be careful never to offend or make others uncomfortable with what we say and do.

But the Christ of the Bible is more than any of that. He WAS an engaging teacher; but he was more. He WAS a man of compassionate caring; but he was more. He WAS a revolutionary activist; but he was more. He was, in the words of scripture, the uniquely begotten Son of God. He personified the saving presence of God, and he did so by displaying sacrificial, divine love that would never retaliate or seek revenge.

It was not a pain-free, convenient Christ that declared, "Those who would follow me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me." And to Peter, Jesus said, "You are a stumbling block to me."

Am I a stumbling block to him? Am I trying to force Jesus into my mold—"Jesus, I'll follow you if you'll lead where I want to go—if you'll confirm choices I've already made—choices about who I will be and what I will do for the Kingdom." Following Jesus includes letting go, if necessary, our most cherished beliefs and understandings. The prevailing mindset must be, "It's not about me nor about my beliefs. It's not about whether I'm, right; it's about following Jesus."

Jesus concludes the passage, "Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom."

September 3, 2017

How many of them missed it because they couldn't let go of their already held expectations? Will I miss it for the same reason? Have I missed it already?