

Matthew 16:13-28 - King Jesus and Identity Politics

“Long live Me!”

You don't have the same feel for humanity when you're sitting in traffic as you do when you're walking the crowded streets of Manhattan. I'd love to know the stories of the people as they walk by. How do they answer the question, “Who am I?” At a pivotal point in his ministry, Jesus clarifies who he is and what it means to follow him. This dialogue in two parts is crucial for Jesus' identity and our own. The maxim of our age is “I *think* therefore I am.” “I *desire*, therefore I am.” “I *feel*, therefore I am.” “I *dream*, therefore I am.” Our age says in effect that we the people define who wish to be. Identity, meaning, worth, and purpose are self-selected. The existential self is the imperial self, conquering and colonizing, and setting up self-rule. Self as king, declares, “Long live me!”

This exchange between Jesus and the disciples challenges the prevailing understanding of the self. We are not cosmic orphans left on our own to fend for ourselves. We have been made in the image of God for God and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. We are neither body-less souls nor soul-less bodies but bodies and souls in community. The message of the gospel is that we are loved by God, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him, shall not die but have everlasting life.” The good news is that Jesus came and conquered. Through his sacrificial death and bodily resurrection he defeated sin and death.

Matthew's Gospel lays out this dialogue in two parallel sections. Instead of the Hebrew poet's two parallel lines, as we have in the Psalms, we have two parallel dialogues (16:13-20; 21-28). These two conversations cover similar themes. They use the physical setting or location to identify the nature and work of the Christ. Jesus clarifies who he is in the context of pagan shrines and then he describes how he must go up to Jerusalem to suffer and die. Peter's reaction is crucial in both dialogues. He is blessed for his inspired confession and cursed for his refusal to listen to Jesus. Jesus defines the church and the kingdom in the first conversation, before elaborating on the meaning of discipleship in the second. He cautions the disciples to keep quiet about his identity as the Christ during this interim period. But this caution is temporary and will soon be lifted at Pentecost.

A Secular Setting

The first dialogue takes place in the region of Caesarea Philippi. The setting for this exchange is significant. Jesus and the disciples were in the vicinity of pagan shrines to the Roman Caesar, the Syrian god of Baal, and the Greek god Pan. They encountered pilgrims walking along a deep gorge on their way to worship at shrines embedded in the rock on the slopes of Mount Hermon. J. M. Barrie's fictional character Peter Pan was inspired by the Greek god Pan, a minor god of nature and fertility. Peter Pan is a cultural icon in the West symbolizing perpetual adolescence. He is a free-spirited, mischievous young boy who can fly. He spends his never-ending childhood having adventures in Neverland. The ancient Greek god Pan and the modern Peter Pan have something in common: an endearing and entertaining myth dedicated to a wild, untamable selfishness.

Jesus' situational awareness waits until he is in the northern most region, on the boundary between Israel and the world, to ask the question, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?” The disciples respond, “Some

say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” The popular opinion about Jesus is high praise. Jesus reminds the people of the great prophets. The disciples must of thought that they were on the ground floor for a triumphant mass movement that would take back Israel. Then, Jesus asked a second question: “Who do you say that I am?” Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Peter’s reply is not an opinion; it is a confession, and a confession of the highest order. Jesus blessed him. The source of Peter’s revelation is divine, not humanistic. “For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Jesus declares emphatically that upon this confession of faith he will build his church and give to the church the keys of the kingdom. Jesus links the church and the kingdom. This first teaching defines the foundation and identity of the Church and Kingdom.

Resident Aliens

In his letter to Christ’s followers throughout Asia Minor, Peter develops this identity. *“You yourselves are like living stones built into a spiritual house. . . . You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light.”* To be redeemed in Christ is to be ransomed from “the empty way of life handed down to [us] from our ancestors” (1 Peter 1:18). The clash of identities is sometimes easier to see in a culture other than our home culture. Northern Ghana is a tribal culture. The community comes first and the individual is second. The pressure to conform to cultural customs, rituals, and taboos is great. When a person comes to Christ and is baptized, the spiritual, moral, and ethical break with the old culture is dramatic. Overnight the Christian often feels like a resident alien, an outsider, in her or his home culture. The “new tribe” identity is powerful.

This is not always the case in our culture. We are steeped in individualism and personal autonomy. We are little chiefs with multiple tribal identities: family, school, work, sports, church, friends, etc. And each of these tribal identities have their own set of customs, rituals, offerings, and obligations, that compete for our loyalty. Colleagues at work, next door neighbors, work-out friends, and even family members, may not know that we belong to the new tribe. Jesus matched Peter’s Spirit-inspired break-through confession with his own radical description of our “new tribe” identity.

This confessional identity goes a long way in helping us understand the relationship between church and kingdom. Jesus links church and kingdom in such a way that there is no kingdom or kingdom work outside the Church. There is some confusion about this among sincere Christians. Scot McKnight, in *The Kingdom Conspiracy*, describes two approaches to the kingdom that miss the mark. There is the “skinny jeans” approach that equates the kingdom with good deeds done by good people to make the world a better place and the “pleated pants” approach that spiritualizes the kingdom, making the kingdom about redemptive moments and hints of God’s rule and reign outside the church in society at large.

But in Matthew 16, Jesus binds church and kingdom together. There is no kingdom outside the church. The church grants access to and exclusion from the kingdom on the basis of confession. Jesus is the one and only King. The Kingdom of God is a people under the reign of Christ, the Anointed One, the Messiah. Kingdom mission is first and foremost church mission. The first dialogue concludes with a surprising directive. Jesus strictly charges the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ - the King.

The second dialogue follows the pattern of the first with a specific reference to place (Jerusalem) and Jesus' salvation awareness, followed by Peter's rebuke and Jesus' curse, leading to Jesus' teaching on the cost of discipleship, and concluding with a surprising expectation. It is important for us to see both dialogues in parallel, because together each helps to establish and interpret the other.

Crucified King

Salvation awareness required Jesus to be straightforward about the meaning of the confession because no one, especially Peter, expected a crucified King. The text implies that Jesus repeatedly emphasized that he “must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised.” Jesus distinguished between opinion and confession in a pagan setting, Caesarea Philippi. He defines the meaning of confession in view of a religious setting, Jerusalem. The pagan and religious impact of Jesus' teaching is significant. Both the pagan shrines of Caesarea Philippi and the religious traditions of Jerusalem are upended by the gospel.

Peter took Jesus aside and began to rebuke him. We do not know how many times Peter listened to Jesus explain how he must go up to Jerusalem to suffer at the hands of the religious leaders before he deliberately took Jesus aside and decided to set him straight on what it meant to be the king. Undoubtedly Peter had a lengthy argument in mind — all those OT passages on the glory and majesty and triumph of the king — but he didn't have time to get it out. All Peter could get out was, “Never, Lord! This shall never happen to you!” before Jesus cut him off with a curse, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Peter got the confession right, but he didn't have a clue as to what the confession meant to Jesus and his disciples. It is remarkable how Peter *and ourselves* can get the confession right and the commitment wrong. Peter's inability to grasp the truth of what Jesus said shows how inadequate and distorted his Bible reading had been (John 3:10). He did not understand that the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many. This is a sober warning to all who confess Christ. We can get the confession right, but be way off when it comes to the commitment.

Jesus follows up his strong reprimand to Peter with explicit teaching on the cost of discipleship. If we confess Christ we need to pay attention to what Jesus says about denying ourselves and taking up our cross and following Jesus. The parallel teaching on Church and Kingdom in the first dialogue helps to put Jesus' teaching on discipleship into perspective in the second dialogue. God's chosen people, his royal priesthood, his holy nation, and his special possession have not only been called out of darkness into his marvelous light, but they also have been called to suffer. Peter writes, “because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Peter 2:21).

I'm struck by Jesus' *target audience* when he laid out his demand for self-denial and cross-bearing. He said, “If *anyone* would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.” The cost of discipleship does not belong to an elite group of Christians, but to *all* followers of Christ. There are no ordinary believers and extraordinary believers, all believers are called to take up their cross and follow Jesus.

Nothing to Lose

Many believers around the world take Jesus' words about self-denial and cross-bearing at face value. In the most recent issue of *The Voice of the Martyrs* (9/17) the story is told of Khaled and Samira, a husband and wife who came to Christ in Yemen in 2010. Because of the danger of persecution they kept their Christian faith secret. However after following Jesus for two years they wanted to declare their faith publicly in baptism. Members of the Moslem Brotherhood obtained pictures of Samira's baptism and posted them on Facebook. In the post Khaled was condemned as an evangelist. The publicity led to Khaled being harassed at work. His car windows were smashed and tires slashed. The family dogs were poisoned. Overtime the abuse intensified. Samira was attacked in the market by her nephew who beat her, broke her arm, and dragged her down the street. On the morning of June 9, 2014, Khaled was awoken by screams coming from the kitchen. Samira was engulfed in flames. Someone had replaced cooking oil with gasoline. She lived for two more agonizing weeks. Before she died she told Khaled that she had forgiven everyone who persecuted them, including the man responsible for her burns. In 2014 Khaled and his children were able to leave Yemen but they continue to suffer persecution in their host country. Khaled continues to praise the Lord for all that has happened, because, as he says, "I have nothing to lose." His words echo Jesus' saying, "For whoever wants to save their life, will lose it, but whoever loses their life will find it."

In her memoir *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*, Rosaria Butterfield chronicles her conversion to Christ in 1999. She was a tenured professor of English and women's studies at Syracuse University from 1992 to 2002. Her primary academic field was critical theory, specializing in queer theory. Her historical focus was 19th century literature, informed by Freud, Marx, and Darwin. She advised the LGBT student group, wrote Syracuse University's policy for same-sex couples, and actively lobbied for LGBT aims alongside her lesbian partner. In order to refute the Religious Right she began to read the Bible thoroughly and in-depth, which led eventually to her conversion to Christ. The fallout, professionally, financially, and relationally, was cataclysmic. In her words, she lost "everything but the dog and gained eternal life in Christ." (<http://rosariabutterfield.com/biography/>).

Jesus joined the doctrine of the cross and the practice of cross-bearing into one God-given reality. Just as church and kingdom are joined together so too are confession and commitment. We cannot have Christ's sacrifice on the cross without our sacrifice in Christ. Jesus ends the dialogue with two rhetorical questions: "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul?"

Christ-with-me-in-suffering Friends

In a recent article published by the Gospel Coalition, Joni Eareckson Tada reflects on the 50th anniversary of her diving accident. She was 17 when she broke her neck and became a quadriplegic. She has lived for fifty years in a wheelchair without the use of her hands or legs. Her story embraces the power of the cross on many levels, from self-understanding to costly discipleship. Early in her ordeal, Joni became convinced that "*God permits what he hates to accomplish what he loves.*" Her "Christ-with-me-in-suffering" friends inspired her outreach to others. This summer, Joni and Friends will hold 27 Family Retreats in the United States and 23 in less resourced nations, reaching thousands of special-needs families for Christ. A few weeks ago at a retreat in Alabama, Joni was lunching in a big, noisy dining hall when a college-aged volunteer approached Joni, holding a kid with Down syndrome on her hip. She gestured at the crowd and asked, "Miss Joni, do you ever think how none of this would be happening were it not for your diving accident?" Joni flashed a smile and said, "It's why I thank God everyday for my wheelchair." After she left, Joni stared for a

moment at the dining hall scene. “She’s right. . .how did I get here? It has everything to do with God and his grace — not just grace over the long haul, but grace in tiny moments. . . .The beauty of such grace is that it eclipses the suffering until one July morning, you look back and see five decades of God working in a mighty way.”

Jesus began the conversation by asking who do people say the Son of Man is; he ends the dialogue by declaring, “For the Son of Man is going to come in his Father’s glory with his angels, and then he will reward each person according to what they have done.” He concludes the first paragraph by warning the disciples not to tell anyone; he ends the second paragraph by promising that they will see with their own eyes what he was talking about: “Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.”

“I am what I am by the grace of God”

There is a difference between a positive opinion about Jesus and the confession “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” This confession is sourced in the revelation of God. “Blessed are you, _____ ! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.” Pagan pluralists and religious types may admire Jesus, but they don’t follow King Jesus. Christ’s followers know they’re not their own, they have been bought with a price (1 Cor 6:19). The apostle Paul summed it up well when he said, “I have been crucified with Christ. I no longer live, but Christ lives in me, and the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). In the present age, reality is both malleable and submissive to the existential self. The prevailing maxim is: "I think (I feel) (I desire) (I dream) . . . therefore I am." The message of the Gospel is, "You are loved by God . . .therefore you are." The followers of the crucified Lord Jesus and coming King say with the apostle, “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain” (1 Cor 15:10).