

Who do you say that I am? Mark 8:27-38

I don't look like a Korean

I don't know whether you have realized it or not but I don't look like a Korean. I bet you haven't noticed. I don't know why, but even many Koreans do not recognize me as a Korean if I do not speak. I lived in Canada for a year to study English when I was 22 years old. At the start of each semester, people from Korean churches came to the campus to invite newcomers to their churches. One day, my class ended earlier than usual, so I waited for my friends in the lobby. As I waited, I overheard a group of Koreans near me talking with one another, wondering if they should invite me to their church. One of them said, "he is not Korean" and the others agreed. I didn't speak a word until I met my Korean friends. When they heard me speaking with my friends in Korean, they looked at each other in surprise and said, "he is a Korean." On another occasion, Juhee and I went to a Korean market. The cashier was Korean. She spoke in Korean with Juhee but she spoke in English with me. I must not look like a typical Korean.

We can easily recognize racial differences in people. No one in our congregation would argue that Yohan is an Italian name or that I look of European descent. Right? People may easily perceive one's skin color, but they may not easily recognize one's nationality or ethnicity. But there is an even more difficult thing to recognize than one's nationality or ethnicity. Can you easily differentiate Christians from non-Christians? There is a Christian hymn entitled, "They Will Know We are Christians by our Love" but can you really tell the difference between Christians and non-Christians by love? In reality, it is almost impossible to tell who is Christian and who is not. There is only one difference between Christians and non-Christians: It's Christ. This is the most important difference, and Jesus wants us to recognize it.

Who do you say that I am?

In a village near Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked his disciples "Who do people say that I am?" and "Who do you say that I am?" The second one is the central question for Christians. Who is Jesus to you?

A Baptist, a Catholic and Methodist were standing before the pearly gates after they died.

Jesus himself met them and said: "I have one question that you must answer: who do you say that I am?" The Catholic replied, "The church teaches . . ." Jesus interrupted, "I didn't ask about the church, I asked about you! You cannot enter!"

The Baptist answered, "The Bible says . . ." Jesus interrupted, "I didn't ask about the Bible, I asked you! You cannot enter!"

The Methodist then said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!" Jesus said, "Yes, that is correct! You may..." Before Jesus finish his sentence, the Methodist continued, "but on the other hand . . ."

This is a joke that we, Methodists, think too much, rather than simply believing. But sometimes, we need to think... think deeply about who Jesus is. Who he is matters because his identity shapes our own. Who is Jesus to you? Peter answered, "You are the Christ." Peter's confession became the bedrock of Christianity. But Peter's answer did not solve the problem completely.

What does it mean to believe that Jesus is the Christ? We need to start with the meaning of Christ. Some kids misunderstand Christ as the last name of Jesus. But Christ is a title for the savior or redeemer who would bring salvation to the people. Peter had his own understanding of

Christ. We all have our own understandings of Christ. When Peter confessed that “You are the Christ,” his understanding of Christ in his mind was similar to the understanding of Christ in the wider society. He expected the Christ who would free Israel from their Gentile oppressors, purify the people, and restore Israel’s independence and glory. For Peter, Christ was the powerful victor. Like Peter, we would also like a savior who is a winner, and one who makes us winners. We want someone who is strong and powerful, someone who will rescue us from our troubles and defeat our enemies. Too often in popular evangelism, Jesus is presented in this way -- as a kind of superhero who solves every problem for us, as a guarantor of prosperity and success. This is a popular understanding of Jesus Christ today.

You are the Christ!

But to say “Christ” to someone is to give up our right to define what “Christ” means. Christ is someone with authority, control, or power over others. If we say that Jesus is the Christ to me, it means that we acknowledge his authority to define who he is, as well as who we are.

While Peter expected Christ, the victor, Jesus insists on identifying with the lowliest of losers. He allowed himself to be judged and condemned by Jewish religious leaders. He allowed himself to be mocked, tortured, and executed as a criminal by the Romans in order to be the savior of his people. When Jesus’ definition of Christ did not cohere with his own understanding of Christ, Peter rebuked Jesus and began to correct him. By doing so, Peter tries to behave like a patron, a patron of Christ! Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ but he did not really acknowledge his authority. Rather, he took the position of patron and tried to define who Jesus should be. This is a common mistake we often make when we think of Jesus Christ. Instead of following Jesus, like Peter, we sometimes attempt to define Jesus according to our own framework.

When Peter tried to behave like a patron, not a disciple, Jesus harshly criticized him. “Get behind me Satan.” Jesus didn’t say “Get away.” But “Get behind me!” We must remember that it is not ‘we’ who define who Jesus is, but it is Jesus who defines himself and who we are. Disciples are not to guide, lead or possess, rather they are to follow. And so we are to follow him. Confessing Jesus as Christ means to follow and allow Christ to define who we are.

Have you ever received chiropractic treatment? What do chiropractors do? They correct the alignment of a spinal joint, which has been misaligned due to incorrect posture. What do you need to do while you receive the treatment? You need to relax your muscles and let the chiropractor correct your misaligned joints. Right?

Confessing Jesus as our Christ means to give him the authority to correct us who have been disfigured by our own sins and failures. Confessing Jesus Christ is an act of faith that allows God’s grace to enter into our broken lives and let this grace makes us anew. God’s grace to us is that our brokenness and failings are not the final word. Our God says, “I love you too much to let your sin define you and be the final word. I am a God who makes all things new.” Instead of letting our sins and failures define who we are, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, took the cross for our sake and made this love define who we are.

Of course, confessing Jesus as our Savior will not instantly change our character and behavior. Just as one chiropractic treatment does not magically solve your back pain, confessing Jesus as Christ does not magically change our bad behaviors. We are still prone to committing sin. But confessing Jesus Christ means embarking on a lifelong journey of allowing his identity to gradually shape our own. It means allowing Jesus to remold our spirits and correct our actions as we continue to develop our spiritual muscle by following his lead. Who is Jesus? He is the

Christ. Confess Jesus as your Christ and let Christ lead your way forward. Amen.