

Gradual confession: Matthew 16:13-20

Only Peter stands up to answer Jesus' question.

by [Karoline M. Lewis](#) in the [August 12, 2008](#) issue

The conversation at Caesarea Philippi is a defining moment for the synoptic Gospels, although only Matthew and Mark name it as the location for Peter's confession, "You are the Messiah." For the Gospel narratives as post-Easter interpretations, reflections and perspectives, who Jesus is constitutes the most important question for those early communities that claimed belief in him. Putting the question on the lips of Jesus himself makes it a question for all believers, one which they must answer for themselves. The text itself indicates this deliberate move, not only in content but also in form. Jesus first asks the question from a third-person perspective: "Who do people say that I am?" But then the grammar shifts to the second person, "Who do *you* say that I am?"

Jesus directs the question to all of the disciples, but only Peter stands up to answer. The purpose of including his response may be to highlight the importance of his role in the early church. As Jesus says, "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church." Yet the distinction between a general address to the disciples and the individual response of Peter suggests that each believer must offer a personal reply. It is not enough to respond to Jesus' question with what other people think, to repeat what other people say, to accede to popular assent. Confession demands belief, but it also necessitates articulation, for the sake of our own affirmations and for the sake of that which is confessed. Peter's answer, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God," calls into existence and meaning the very thing to which he gives voice.

In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Peter's answer to Jesus' question is followed by the first of Jesus' predictions of his suffering and death. A majority of commentators on this event emphasize that Peter misunderstands and that Jesus, knowing that Peter needs to understand what confessing Jesus as the Christ will mean, addresses any misunderstanding by foretelling his own suffering and death. Peter rebukes Jesus for this—not because of any possible suffering for himself, but because of the possibility that Jesus will suffer. Is this another example of Peter not understanding what Jesus

means? In what sense is Peter's suffering more acceptable than that of his Master? Is Peter's idea of messiahship being challenged, and the new portrayal not one that he can accept? This is a critical avenue of meaning for discipleship today. We too must make the confession, "You are the Christ," and then learn what it means to make this claim.

Jesus says to Peter, "My Father in heaven has revealed this to you," and when Jesus predicts his fate, Peter's response is, "God forbid." It may be one thing to accept the fate of Jesus; it may be a different thing altogether to accept what Jesus' fate communicates about God.

Peter makes his confession *before* Jesus points to the realities of what that confession will mean both about Jesus and about discipleship. This signifies several important truths. First, the confession must be confessed. When something is said out loud, that act calls whatever is said into existence and affirms that Jesus as Christ needs to be claimed, according to the Gospel writers. Their intent is that there will be an ongoing confession of generations of believers, an ongoing proclamation of the good news.

Second, being able to confess Jesus as Messiah is a critical thing, but having a sense of what that means is an ongoing process. The character of Peter illustrates this. It is not simply that Peter just doesn't get it, but that one wonders if he is ever meant to get it or, for that matter, if we are. How a confession of Jesus as Christ is lived out is an unfolding, a revealing that is not expected to have its meaning contained in the confession alone. This is what Jesus means, in part, about taking up our cross, about losing our lives for the sake of finding them again.

Finally, confessing Jesus as Christ before acknowledging Jesus as crucified Messiah suggests that our confession is about proclamation of faith, not about comprehension of faith. When we answer for ourselves, "You are the Christ," we claim both victory over death and the promise of the resurrection. When confession is only knowledge, then the cross is only death on a tree and the resurrection is only reward.

His question at Caesarea Philippi is not Jesus' final question to his disciples: they will have their last supper together, the moments at Gethsemane, the last words from the cross. The Caesarea Philippi event occurs at roughly the midpoint of the story, intimating that it is our story now, in the midst of the messiness of our lives. It is here in the middle of the story, when we confess the confession, that its meaning

arises and unfolds and moves us from death to life.