

Sunday, September 16, 2012: Mark 8:27-38

by [Christopher A. Henry](#) in the [September 5, 2012](#) issue

Even though I grew up in a church manse, am the son of a minister and was raised by congregations of wonderful Christian believers, I had not heard *the* question until the summer after my junior year of high school. I remember being confused and slightly put off by the way in which it was asked. I remember the steady, waiting gaze of those sitting across from me in the circle.

It was a youth gathering at a friend's church across town. The church had a basketball court in the basement, and the evening of fun and hoops was to last until ten p.m. But at nine we were all brought into one of the youth rooms and asked to sit in a circle. The youth pastor offered a brief prayer, then said we were going to go around the circle and each answer the question: When did you accept Jesus Christ into your heart?

I knew that I'd been baptized at St. Andrew's on Sunday, November 1, 1982, and confirmed at Vandalia Presbyterian Church in 1995, but this information didn't seem to be enough. What the others in the circle were describing was a moment of decision, when they spoke words that welcomed Jesus into their hearts. Here I was, the preacher's kid, without an adequate answer to this question of great consequence. How embarrassing! Yet when the pastor asked if anyone wanted to accept Jesus that very night, I couldn't respond to that invitation either. Instead I stumbled back onto the basketball court with great uncertainty about where I stood with Jesus, or who he was to me.

These verses from Mark 8 are often understood as one of those critical moments of decision for the disciples, as their opportunity to accept Jesus into their hearts. This crew of 12 had enjoyed front row seats to the controversy surrounding a man whom some called prophet, some Messiah, some revolutionary and some blasphemous heretic.

Here, at the exact midpoint of Mark's Gospel, Jesus turned to the disciples on the road with two key questions. The first was merely descriptive. "Who do people say that I am?" What have you heard on the street and in the fields about me? The disciples had some good answers; they'd been listening to the public, and they repeated what they'd heard. They named Elijah, John the Baptist and the ancient prophets, thus passing this first test with flying colors. This was what the public opinion polls showed.

But Jesus was not finished with them. The next question was more personal and hard-hitting, moving from description to confession. "Who do you say that I am?" This is the foundational question for people of Christian faith. Who is Jesus Christ to us? What differences does he make?

As the boldest of the disciples, Peter responded immediately: "You are the Messiah." From my vantage point, Peter had hit the bulls-eye.

Yet something was missing. We know this because the rest of the story is so odd, so hard to follow, so counterintuitive. Instead of congratulating Peter on a simple and direct answer to a tough question, Jesus silenced him, then began to predict his own suffering, death and resurrection. The juxtaposition is one of the oddest in all of scripture. Peter confesses his faith in Jesus as Messiah, and Jesus responds with ominous words of pain, rejection and death.

It is as if Mark wants to communicate two things at once: yes, Peter was right: Jesus was the Messiah. But he was not the Messiah that Peter expected or desired. Jesus made this point at the end of chapter eight, giving a

warning against being ashamed of his life and words.

After scolding Peter, Jesus turned to the crowds that surrounded him and issued a challenge: if you want to become my followers, deny yourselves, take up your cross and follow me. It is not enough to confess Jesus as Messiah. We must be ready to embrace *this* Messiah, the one who will question our deepest allegiances and demand absolute discipleship, the one who requires us to move from selfishness to generosity, from fear to love, from hatred to compassion, from the narrowness of self-righteousness to the wideness of mercy. If we want to follow this Messiah, it's going to take more than acceptance and assent, more than a moment of decision. It's going to take change in habits, assumptions and actions.

The earliest Christian affirmation was three simple words that meant everything to our ancestors in faith: Jesus is Lord. No one else is Lord—not the emperor or the chief priests or the gods of Rome or the idols of our own creation. This creed changed the world because those who professed it lived as if it were true. So perhaps the most important question in our churches is not “When did you invite Jesus into your heart?” but “What did you do with him once he got there?”