

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Sunday, May 2, 2010**

WHO DO YOU SAY HE IS?

Matthew 16:13-20

Everybody has an opinion about something. Some people, it seems, have opinions about just about everything. Both our politics and our pop culture are often driven by opinion polls. Everywhere you turn, opinions abound about such things as:

- Who should be the next “American Idol”?
- Who is the best on “Dancing with the Stars”?
- How do you think the Redskins did in the NFL draft?
- What do you think of Donovan McNabb coming to D. C. to be the new QB of the Redskins?
- If you’re a part of NASCAR nation, which car is your favorite: #8? #24? #48?
- What do you think of the health care reform bill recently signed into law by the president?
- What do you think of Arizona’s new law to deal with illegal immigration?
- What kind of music in worship most appeals to you? Some like classical. Some like traditional. Some like contemporary.
- Which of Baskin-Robbins’ 31 flavors of ice cream do you like best?
- Which is your favorite pizza: Pizza Hut? Papa John’s? Neither?

Got opinions about any of these things?

From pizza to politics and everything in between, people have opinions about everything under the sun. In many cases, our opinions are simply a reflection of our personal preferences. But not everything is just a matter of opinion. Some things are a matter of right or wrong. True or false.

NOT A MATTER OF OPINION

In our Scripture reading today, Jesus asked His disciples a question. He wanted to know what other people were saying about Him, what other people thought about Him. Some, like Herod Antipas (who had earlier put John to death) believed Jesus was John the Baptist come back from the dead. Others thought Jesus was the second coming of Elijah, whose appearance as the forerunner of the Messiah was foretold by the prophet Malachi (Malachi 4:5-6). Still others identified Him with Jeremiah or another of the prophets of old. In each of these cases, the people saw something special in Jesus, and held Him in high regard. But they did not, or did not yet, recognize His true identity.

If we were to ask today what people think of Jesus, some would answer that it doesn’t really matter what you think of Him. Who He is, what He did and taught, are just not important today. Some people are uncomfortable with the claim of the Christian faith that we can be

made right with God only through the death of Jesus on the cross on our behalf. They are not just uncomfortable with the idea, they are offended by it. They are offended by what they perceive to be the narrow, intolerant, exclusive teaching of the Christian faith that Jesus is the only way to salvation. I understand that, even though I disagree. It wasn't the church that came up with this idea that there is only one way to heaven. It came from Jesus Himself. It was Jesus who said: "I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father, except through me" (John 14:6).

Some of you have heard me say this before, and you will likely hear me say it again: The amazing thing to me is not the idea that there is only one Savior and only one way to heaven. The really amazing thing is that there is any way at all! But God, in the wonder of His grace, has provided a way and a Savior for us. Instead of complaining that not all roads lead to heaven and not all opinions about Jesus are equally valid, I will be eternally grateful that Jesus has made a way for us to be forgiven and to know that we have a home in heaven with Him.

In addition to those who are offended in some way by Jesus, there are some, like the followers of Islam, who revere Jesus as a great teacher and prophet, but they do not regard Him as the greatest prophet (Mohammed), nor do they believe He is God ("There is no god but Allah," they say). Like many non-Muslims as well, they pick and choose the parts of Jesus' teaching they want to follow. Some who profess to be followers of Jesus do the same thing.

Then there are some, in the relativistic thinking of our day, who say that who Jesus is to you may be radically different from who He is to me. What you believe about Jesus may be true for you but not for me. You may believe something about His identity and work that is incompatible with what I believe, even contradictory. And yet what each of us believes is true for us. If this sounds weird or irrational to you, welcome to the post-modernity of our age.

The truth is that what a person thinks about Jesus is not just a matter of personal opinion. It is a question which has implications for both this life and eternity. Which is why, when Jesus addressed the question directly to His disciples, when He said to them in verse 15, "What about you?" it became yet another turning point, another pivotal moment in the life of Simon Peter.

Peter spoke up immediately. He answered Jesus without hesitation. He didn't have to think about the question, because he had already thought about it and reached a conclusion. He already had the answer in his heart.

On a different occasion, in John 6, when many of Jesus' followers were leaving Him, Jesus turned to the Twelve and said: "Do you want to leave too?" Then, as here in Matthew 16, it was Peter who spoke up first. On that occasion, he said: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (John 6:66-69). Peter's faith and understanding were not fully developed yet. His faith was real, as we said last week, but not perfect. It was not yet fully formed. The day would come (after the death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and after the coming of the Holy Spirit on the followers of Christ at Pentecost) when Peter would boldly say: "Salvation is found in no one

else (but Jesus), for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12). No other name but the name of Jesus. No other Savior but Jesus.

At this point, in Matthew 16, Peter made a clear and definite confession of faith in Jesus. What did he say? “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (16:16). The title *Christ* (*Messiah* in Hebrew) means “Anointed One.” In the life of Israel in the Old Testament, both kings and priests were anointed and set apart for special service to God. As “the Anointed One,” Jesus is both our ruler and our priestly representative – our advocate – before the throne of God. As the Messiah or Christ, He fulfilled the promise of God to send His people a deliverer who would establish the reign of God in our hearts.

Peter also affirms here the deity or divinity of Jesus. He had seen enough of Jesus by this time to realize that He was more than just a man. More than a wise teacher or spell-binding preacher. More than a miracle-working healer who could even control the forces of nature. It was a pivotal moment for Peter. The light went on in his heart. He knew that Jesus really was the Son of God.

It is a turning point, a pivotal moment, in the life of every person when that happens. When you realize that Jesus really is who He says He is, and you give Him your heart.

Have you given Him your heart in faith? Have you confessed your faith in Him? Not the faith of your parents. Not the faith of your spouse. Not the faith of a friend you admire. Have you confessed *your* faith in the Lord Jesus? If not, let today be the day. Let today be the turning point for you. Give voice to your faith today. The Bible says: “If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:9-10).

Who do you say He is?

Before I close, there are three or four additional points I want you to take note of very briefly.

REVEALED BY THE FATHER

First, notice that Peter didn’t figure out who Jesus really was on his own, by means of his own reasoning. He didn’t stumble onto the truth of Jesus’ identity by accident. It wasn’t intuitively obvious to him. How did it happen? By revelation. It was revealed to him by God the Father. Look at verse 17, where Jesus says: “Blessed are you, Simon, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven.”

If you have come to see Jesus for who He really is, if you have come to know Him as the Son of God, the Savior of sinners, and the Hope of heaven, praise God for opening the eyes of your heart. You, we, Peter, are blessed of God. He has revealed to you what remains hidden from the eyes of many people today, including many of the brightest and most brilliant people in the world – people like Richard Dawkins and Stephen Hawking and Christopher Hitchens, who are too wise in their own eyes to believe in the God of the Bible or to embrace His grace

in the person and work of His Son. Unless God Himself opens our eyes and gives us the gift of faith, we will never believe in Him.

YOU ARE PETER

Second, notice verse 18, where Jesus says: “You are Peter...” Flash back to John 1, to the time when Andrew first brought his brother to meet Jesus. On that occasion, Jesus had said: “You are Simon... You will be called Peter” (1:42). Now, in Matthew 16, Jesus says: “You are Peter.” A change has taken place. An inner transformation has begun in the life of Simon Peter. It was not yet complete, but it was genuine, and He who began this good work in Peter’s life would eventually bring it to completion, as Paul says in Philippians 1:6 that the Lord will do in our lives as well. By the grace and power of the Lord Jesus, Simon the fisherman became Peter the rock.

God is still changing lives today. He can change your life. Give Him a chance. Give Him your heart. And if there is a prodigal in your life who is headed down the wrong road, if there is someone you love who seems to be going the wrong direction in life, Jesus can change him or her too. He can! Entrust that person to Him. Trust the Lord Jesus to do in his or her life what only He can do.

ON THIS ROCK I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH

Third, we don’t have time today to get into the fine points of the theological arguments over what Jesus meant or didn’t mean in verse 18 about the “rock” on which He will build His church. What is beyond dispute is that it is Jesus who will build the church, and the church belongs to Him. He says: “*I* will build *my* church.” The church doesn’t belong to Peter or Paul or Calvin or Luther or Joel Osteen or John Piper or you or me. It belongs to Jesus.

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

Nor do we have time to delve deeply into the meaning of “the keys of the kingdom of heaven” which Jesus says He will give to Peter in verse 19. Let me just say this much: Keys are used to lock and unlock doors, right? They are used to open doors and to close them. At the time of Jesus, a key was a symbol of authority. The person who had the keys had the power to let people in or to keep people out. I think what Jesus means here by “the keys of the kingdom” is the proclamation of the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes (Romans 1:16). To Peter and the rest of the apostles was given the mission to proclaim the good news of salvation to people everywhere. In doing so they would open the door of the kingdom of God to everyone who believed the gospel, and they would shut the door to those who rejected the message. All who embraced the gospel message would be included in the kingdom. Everyone who shut the door of their hearts to the saving love of Jesus would be excluded.

That is still the way it is today. And it is still the mission of the church to proclaim the message of the gospel and to urge people everywhere to turn in trusting faith to the Lord Jesus, who alone has the power to save.

Who Jesus is, is not just a matter of personal opinion. And what you do with Him has implications for life here and now, and for all eternity. Amen.