

**Louisville Presbyterian Theological Seminary**  
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**Term Paper Christianity**  
**Text: Mark 8: 27-34**

There's a trick that sometimes occurs in higher education, a conjuring trick, in which normal human beings are turned into a rather odd sort of professional student. You can, if you try, take a perfectly normal person who if asked a perfectly normal question like, "Do you think God loves everybody?" can give you a perfectly normal answer like, "Yes, I think so." And, under certain circumstances this person can be trained to respond to the same question by telling you what St. Augustine, John Calvin and Elizabeth Johnson all say about God's love, with multiple footnotes and a bibliography, but they won't be able to answer the question you asked.

Sometimes the more education we get, the less able we seem to be to answer a straightforward question with a straightforward answer – and the less understandable we are in any case. I remember a story that Jessie Duncan once told me. Of course, you wouldn't know Jessie and she has long departed this world for the next, where, I'm pretty sure, she is advising God on a number of important matters. Jessie was a phenomenal lady of the old school who suffered me (and that is the right phrase) to be her minister when I served the historic Beechgrove Church in Aberdeen, Scotland. She was the sort of person people refer to as formidable.

One of her favorite stories was about a friend of hers whose son taught medicine at a leading university. Jessie also had a son and one day she and her friend were comparing notes on their children, as proud parents will do. Really, they were dueling.

Jessie said that her son was a successful trial lawyer in London. The other woman said her son was a professor of medicine.

Jessie alluded to the rather ample amount of money her son was paid. The other woman described her son's beautiful home in the city and his country house in the Highlands.

Jessie talked about a book her son had just written that was getting rave reviews in the press. The other woman, fed up with the whole game, delivered her knockout punch. *"My son has written a book too,"* she said, *"and he is so smart that noooooobody can understand it."*

It's possible to be such an expert that nobody can understand you, but what is really a problem, what is really a problem *for us as Christians, and particularly those of us who are engaged in*

*ministry*, is the tendency to think that we can deflect the straight-forward and perfectly normal questions of our own personal faith by reciting the opinions of others.

This is an ailment that is not unique to the theologically well-educated. Indeed, some of the people in my experience who are particularly good at answering direct, normal questions of personal faith have been seminary professors and seminary students and ministers and church leaders. On the other hand, probably most of us, at some time or the other, have been afflicted by what I would call "Term Paper Christianity," the tendency to side-step the uncomfortable demand to answer the personal question of discipleship by providing a litany of views held by others.

That's the first issue we confront in our text this morning, although the disciples had never heard of a term paper.

We discover in this passage from Mark's Gospel the simple fact that *our personal profession of faith in Christ doesn't have footnotes*. Our profession of faith in Christ is not an exercise in speculative metaphysics; it is a pledge of our undivided loyalty rendered directly to God in the first person, singular. It is a genuinely subjective statement.

Let's reflect for a moment on the story we heard from Mark's gospel.

Jesus and the disciples, Mark tells us, were on their way into the villages of Caesarea Philippi. It's appropriate that Jesus would raise this question at this precise moment.

Caesarea Philippi was a major site for the worship of a variety of gods. It was a place where many things were worshiped rather than the Lord God, a place of divided loyalties, if you will, where people were enthralled first to this god, and then another, adoring first this deity, then that one, in the hope of making life work the way they wanted it to, to give them more security, more safety and greater comfort.

As Jesus and his disciples were "on the way," as the text reads, Jesus asked them: "*Who do people say that I am?*"

This is the age-old invitation to "Term Paper Christianity." No personal commitment is required to answer this question. We can hide behind the opinions and convictions of others as much as we like. All we need to do is render an accurate account of the views of others.

It's like someone asking, "What do Presbyterians or Methodists or Lutherans believe about the sacraments?" "Or, what is the latest thinking on the authorship of Mark's Gospel?" "Or, what does Professor Sticklepoint say about the soteriology of the posthyperlapsarian phenomenologists? I made that last bit up, but we might need to check to see if there's a section at AAR devoted to it.

We can answer any and all of these questions without swearing our allegiance to anyone or anything. And the disciples do just that: "They answered Jesus, *'Some say you are John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.'*"

However interesting and however valuable this information might have been for understanding the viewpoints of others, it served to keep the identity and claim and call of Jesus at arm's length. Such reporting of the views of others does not threaten us.

Jesus will not leave the matter at that level. Jesus sees plainly the popular misconceptions regarding his mission. Jesus understands clearly the confusion and the superficiality of the people who have seen in him only a reflection of their own dreams and anxieties. Jesus knows that his disciples, despite the fact that they have been with him day and night for so long, share this confusion. So he presses on to a more critical question. He presses on to the personal question that excludes "Term Paper Christianity."

**Jesus asks, "But who do *YOU* say that I am?"**

Whenever I read this passage from Mark's Gospel, my thoughts return to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the young theologian whose life was taken by the Nazi regime. Some time ago, I watched a fascinating documentary on his life, and I was struck by the comments made by an elderly woman who studied under Bonhoeffer when she was a young girl at university. Bonhoeffer, she said, was unlike any of the other professors she had at the university. She said he cared about his students learning everything they could critically about the Bible and theology. But for him that wasn't the most important thing. He told his students that whenever they were reading the Bible, the primary thing was to listen for the claim of the Word of God on them personally.

As Bonhoeffer understood, we are not allowed to stop at the question, "Who do OTHERS say I am?" When Christ meets us in the Word and through the power of the Spirit of God, Christ demands us to answer the question, "Who do *YOU* say that I am?"

Bonhoeffer, observing the contrast between these two questions, once said in a lecture that the first question, the Term Paper question, represents all of those attempts to find a neat category to fit Jesus Christ into, a way to pigeon-hole Jesus, a way we can classify Christ among all the other "known quantities" of this world, a way to keep Christ from making a unique claim upon our lives.

*"Some say you are a great teacher, Jesus, not divine - of course - but a great human teacher."* That classification done, we can dust our hands off, and walk away from Jesus. We need never worry again that he will make a unique claim *as God* upon our human lives.

*"Some, Jesus, say you are the Christian version of the myth of the dying god."* That classification accomplished, we need never again worry that Jesus will require us to hear him speak *as Word of God* in all the private and public corners of our lives.

*The most significant question that can be posed in human life is put to the disciples in this text. It is a question that each and every one of us must answer and that we must answer for ourselves.*

Confronted by Jesus Christ we must answer, "**Who do you say that I am?**" No "Term Paper Christianity" will deliver us from this question. No one else's answer to the question will do.

Jesus always asks his disciples: "**Who do you say that I am?**"

Was there a stunned silence for just a moment, I wonder, a hesitation, a beat missed? I often wonder what happens between the words on the pages of the gospels. So much happens in the silences between us. Some might even say that the most important messages are unspoken. Certainly this is true in Christian congregations. Certainly this is true in marriages and friendships. Often, it's what we don't say that reveals the most about us. Was there silence for a moment when Jesus asked the disciples, "Who do you say that I am?"

Did Judas look down and shuffle his feet nervously? Did Matthew think back to the day he left his tax-collector's desk to follow Jesus? Did Andrew's mind wander for just a moment to the "to do" list he had been mentally working on as they walked along?

Only one response is recorded, that of Peter. Peter was often the first to speak up.

"*You are the Messiah,*" Peter answers. This is all that Mark's Gospel records of Peter's answer. Matthew's Gospel says more: "*You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.*" And when Peter says this, Jesus blesses Peter. Jesus tells Peter that he will become the rock on which Christ will build his church.

Then Jesus sternly orders the disciples (all three of the synoptic gospels, Mark, Matthew and Luke, are unanimous on this point) - *then Jesus sternly orders the disciples* - not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. The reason why he orders them not to tell follows immediately: Because *their* concept of "Messiahship" was flawed. The disciples needed to be taught *who* the Messiah was. They needed to be given a new understanding of the identity and the character and the mission of the Messiah. Their own hopes were getting in the way of what God was up to in the world.

*Our ideas can get in the way of the truth. This happens sometimes. Our hopes can get in the way of God's intentions for us.*

Someone once told me about a manager who can't hear what is said to him because as soon as the words are spoken he puts his own spin on whatever is said. He has a hard time hearing the

perspective of anyone else. Whether out of anxiety or a need to control the situation, he reacts rather than reflects. Perhaps some of us have known researchers who are in such a hurry to discover a particular finding that they hopelessly skew their research. What they want to find gets in the way of what the evidence is telling them. Sometimes the disciples of Jesus had a tough time figuring out what Jesus was up to. Their ideas and schemes and (perhaps most of all) their hopes conflicted with God's intentions. This is one of those moments.

Jesus looked into the eyes of his disciples, and he looked into the eyes of the others that crowded round him, and he saw reflected in those eyes the pain of long social and political oppression, economic deprivation, and religious persecution so acute, so overwhelming that every word about the Messiah was immediately converted into a word of deliverance from the oppression of Rome. *The case was not simply that his hearers needed deliverance, but that their hope for deliverance needed deliverance too.*

The same is true of us sometimes. Our hope needs redemption so we can hope for the right things.

"Then [Jesus] began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again." Mark's Gospel adds, "He said all this quite openly." It's as though the writer of the Gospel is admitting, "He said all this quite openly, *and we still didn't get it!*"

Peter had just made his so-called "Great Confession." "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Peter had made that critical leap from second-hand observations to pledging his undivided loyalty to Christ. Peter was ready to enlist in the Messiah's army. "*Sign me up!*" But now Peter finds out that the Messiah's self-understanding was fundamentally at odds with his concept of what a Messiah should be and do.

So Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him. Matthew's Gospel adds the play-by-play color. *Peter takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke him, saying: "God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you."* And Jesus answers Peter with startling force: "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.*"

What's happening here? Peter rebukes Jesus. And Jesus rebukes Peter! In this tense moment, what is happening? Did Jesus have a flashback to another moment when the powers of evil tempted him with world domination, and with self-preservation, and with fame and comfort.

"*Get behind me Satan,*" Jesus now says to the man whom Jesus had just a moment before blessed and named the rock on which he would build his Church. "*Get behind me Satan!*" In that moment, did Jesus catch a whiff of brimstone on the breath of his friend? Did he catch a

glimpse of the dragon's tail sweeping through the crowd? Or maybe Jesus spoke those words under his breath. Maybe Jesus spoke those words aside to something or someone who was rearing his ugly head deep in his own soul - "Get behind me Satan".

Whatever was happening in this tense moment, Peter's words brought Jesus face-to-face with the temptation to avoid the consequences of his incarnation, the temptation to believe that it was a mistake to walk the length of the path that lay before him. Jesus could see from where he stood where he was headed. Jesus could see the cross in his future. And Peter's words offered a false option, an alternative that would have made Jesus' whole life a lie.

Peter's words bring us face-to-face with the perennial temptation of the Church, our temptation to believe that the cross is a mistake, and that a life lived toward God's future is inevitably a life of sweetness and security. Peter wanted to believe it would be a mistake for the Messiah to suffer, to be rejected, to be killed. Perhaps Peter realized in that moment that if he was committed to walk in the way of Christ, then he could hardly avoid to arrive at the same destination. If the Messiah suffers, so do the followers of the Messiah. As Eduard Schweizer has put it so succinctly: *"Whoever wants to follow Jesus must be prepared to share his fate."* Or as Bonhoeffer so eloquently put it, *"When Christ calls us, he bids us come and die."*

"God forbid it, Lord. This must never happen to you," Peter says, "or to me!" He thinks. This is the temptation, isn't it?

As if to hammer his point home, Jesus turns from his private conference with Peter; he urges the crowd and his disciples closer and says: *"If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it."* And he adds, perhaps thinking back to that day of temptation when all the kingdoms of the world were spread out at his feet like a patchwork quilt, *"For what will it profit a person to gain the whole world and lose his own soul?"*

Oh, the confessions we must make with our lives, without the benefit of footnotes.

"Term Paper Christianity" just won't do when it comes to following Jesus of Nazareth. We know that. When Christ asks "Who do you say that I am?" each of us must answer with our own life - or not at all.

Let us pray:

*"O Lord Jesus Christ ... save us from the error of wishing to admire you instead of being willing to follow you and resemble you." Amen.*

(S. Kierkegaard)