

“You are the Christ.” Four short words, and yet words that the Church throughout the ages has seen as so important that they warrant having a festival, which we observe today. What makes this confession of St. Peter so important, and what does it teach us today? Well, the issue of confession, what that is and the effects it has, is central to the Christian faith. God calls on us in His word to make “the good confession,” and by looking at this one from Peter, we’re better able to do that.

This text teaches two key points about confession, and does so by way of contrast, or looking at the two sides of the coin, so to speak. The first of these contrasts is that a confession is both made by an individual and also held in common with others. In a sense, a confession can be understood to be what a person believes, or what he says he believes.

When Jesus asks his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?”, He is asking what the people believe about Him. And as we see, there is a wide variety of thoughts about Jesus. “John the Baptist; and others say, Elijah; and others, one of the prophets.” Jesus then puts the question to the disciples: “But who do you say that I am?” They have been following Jesus around as His disciples; what do they believe about Him? Why are they following Him?

To this, Peter responds and says, “You are the Christ.” They believe that Jesus is the Christ, the one foretold by God throughout the Old Testament who would save His people. And this is belief; not just knowledge. It’s not just information in their heads; it’s guiding their thoughts, words, and deeds. They believe that Jesus is the Christ, and so they’ve given up their previous lives to follow Him, learn from Him, spread the Good News about Him.

Christians today are likewise those whose confession is that Jesus is the Christ. As we hear in Romans, “if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” Part of being a Christian is declaring that you believe Jesus to be the Christ, to be Lord and Savior.

And again, as a confession of belief, it’s not just that a person knows a bunch of random facts or information about Jesus. Nor is it a magic spell, that if those particular sounds come out of your mouth at some point you’ll be in heaven when you die. Rather, it’s a trust in the heart that Jesus is the God who came and sacrificed Himself to pay for all your sins on the cross. It is the individual’s faith coming out in their words and deeds.

At the same time that a confession is held by an individual, a confession is also something that is held in common with others. The word itself means to speak together; that’s the prefix “con-” on the front. When Jesus asks His question to the disciples, it’s actually put to all of them. If we were Southerners, we might more literally translate the Greek, “And who do y’all say that I am?” Or for the Midwestern Bible: “And who do you guys say that I am?” It’s a question for all the disciples.

And yet only Peter answers. “You are the Christ.” Note that right after that, Jesus doesn’t praise Peter and then look at Andrew and say, “And what about you?” and then to James, and John, and

on down the line, ending up with a dozen different confessions. No, the confession stated by Peter is the confession that they hold in common. It is what they say together as the disciples following Jesus.

This unity of confession has always been that to which God has called His people. For example, in the Old Testament, God gave them the Shema, Deuteronomy 6:4: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” To be a part of Israel was to confess that the Lord, Yahweh, was our (plural) God, and the one true God.

Centuries later, Paul writes to Timothy and speaks of another confession shared by the Church, saying, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” The Scriptures also tell us as Christians “to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Having a united confession of faith helps us support each other and keep us together as the people of God. It gives us a common standard to rally around and also to hold each other accountable. It’s also comforting when we hold a common hope, something to which we are all looking forward.

A common confession also helps us in our proclamation to the world around us. If someone wants to know what we believe, we can give answers that don’t conflict or contradict one another. If a church were made up of individuals who all believed their own separate things and had nothing in common, it’s kind of hard for that church to have a unified purpose or reason for being, and who would want to join a group that doesn’t even know for what purpose it exists?

When we have a common confession, we’re able to live out the reality that we are striving to be one flock with one Shepherd, as Jesus described.

In addition to the contrast of a confession being for both individuals and groups, this text also teaches a second contrast. We’re shown that, while a confession can be and often is simple, it also will grow and mature. When Peter answers who he believes Jesus is, his answer is short and sweet. “You are the Christ.” He doesn’t list off every detail he knows about Jesus, nor does he describe every prophecy that he thinks Jesus is fulfilling. And he definitely doesn’t say, “Well, we’ll have to go back to the beginning,” and then start with Genesis 1:1 and quote the entire Scriptures to that point.

Rather, the Holy Spirit leads Peter to hit the main point: Jesus is the Christ, the Savior of the world. It stands out from the rest of the confessions, such as Jesus being one of the prophets, and it answers the main question that not only Jesus but everyone else is asking about Jesus: Is He the Christ, or not?

Throughout history, God’s people have given short, succinct confessions. In the Old Testament, it might be “I fear the Lord,” or again, “The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” In the New Testament Church, they have been along the lines of “Jesus is Lord,” or “Jesus is the Christ,” or “I am a Christian.” These allowed Christians to declare together their belief in Jesus and answer the most pressing questions put before them by the world.

As confessions such as the Apostles' Creed came along, they also served as simple ways to teach the essentials of the faith in a nutshell, such as parents passing it on to their young children or missionaries approaching people who had never heard of Jesus before.

Yet while a confession may have been simple, it also contains more than just the bare words, or something seen as "good enough." And often, this reality causes the confession to be expanded or lengthened.

Again, consider our text. Peter confesses to Jesus, "You are the Christ," which is absolutely correct. Jesus then goes on to teach more about what it means that He is the Christ. "And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again." Being the Christ means that Jesus will endure all that.

But Peter doesn't like it. He takes Jesus aside and begins to rebuke Him. Now, does Jesus say, "Well, as long as you say I'm the Christ, that's good enough, and you can define what that means for yourself"? Not at all! Jesus rebukes Peter: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man." The Lord is teaching that confessing Him to be Christ must also include the right understanding of what that means. Otherwise, such a confession would be a facade, sounding nice but having no real substance.

As time goes on and Peter grows in his faith, we see his confession grow as well. Just listen to all that he writes in his Epistle reading to us, or in his two epistles in general. None of that ever contradicts the central, unchanging truth that Jesus is the Christ, but rather it serves to flesh it out and apply it to the lives of God's people.

This is how our own confessions grow and mature as well. It is natural and good that, at some times, we express our faith in simple, direct terms. Little children can't and shouldn't be expected to give a detailed confession; "Jesus loves me and died for me" is excellent. And if someone asks, "Are you a Christian?", saying "Yes" is perfect.

But faith is a living thing, and it needs to grow. Peter writes at the end of his second letter, "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ." What does this look like? Let's start with Peter's simple confession: "Jesus is the Christ." Who is Jesus? The Bible teaches that Jesus is the Son of God, fully God, the second person of the Holy Trinity, who was also fully human, a real, historical figure who walked the earth, died on a cross outside Jerusalem, bodily rose from the dead on the third day, and now dwells glorified in heaven.

What is the Christ? The One prophesied by God to come and save mankind from sin by atoning for it through His own sacrifice, exchanging our sinfulness for His righteousness. Why was it necessary that Jesus was born and came as the Christ? Because all people are dead in sin, condemned to die eternally, and are unable to save themselves, and must be saved by the action of God, who calls us to faith and grants us life.

And you can go on, expanding the simple statement "Jesus is the Christ" by merely allowing God's Word to explain and answer that good old questions from the Catechism: "What does this mean?"

Our confessions also expand when the devil and the world try to attack God's truth by twisting or obscuring it. In such cases, the Church must more clearly confess what the Word actually says, so that lies not be allowed to stand and entrap people.

So for instance, when false teachers in the time of the early Church tried to say that Jesus was the Son of God and very similar to God and the most perfect of all God's creations – but not actually God Himself – then the Church responded with a confession that we call the Nicene Creed. It's not man's additions to God's Word, but simply the teachings of the Word brought together to address the issue.

Or much later on, when the Holy Roman Emperor, at the direction of the pope, demanded that all these people led by Luther say what they believed, they came together and presented the Augsburg Confession, using Scripture to both state the faith and refute errors they saw present in the medieval Roman church. Still today, we declare ourselves to be "confessional Lutherans" because we hold those confessions made by our fathers in the faith to be a correct teaching of what the Bible says.

As the Scriptures teach us, our confession is a key part of who we are as Christians. It is both a declaration of what we each believe and also common ground that joins us together as God's people. Confessions can be short and to the point, or they can be more lengthy and descriptive, as the time and place require. As we confess the faith together, we join with St. Peter and the Church in every time and place in declaring the wonderful truth to the world that Jesus is the Christ.

In the name of Jesus, amen.