

As Christians, we are called to confess – to speak together – what we believe. Confessing Christ before the world is how we bring more people to Christ. And in John the Baptist, we are given an excellent example of what this looks like. In John, we are shown what to confess, when to confess, and the right attitude to have when we confess. Let us follow in his footsteps, that in our confession, Jesus Christ may always be exalted.

The first thing we see with John is how he confessed the truth, even when a lie would've been much more advantageous to him. John confesses, "I am not the Christ." Why is this such a profound confession, and not a denial, as the Scripture records? Here, John is making this confession in the face of temptations to both pride and fear.

The temptation to pride would've come from John's popularity. Our Gospel reading takes place a little later on in John's ministry, after he has already baptized Jesus. John is quite popular at this point. People from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region surrounding the Jordan River were coming out to him. Everyone from prostitutes to tax collectors to soldiers – and everyone in between – was hearing his fiery preaching, repenting of their sins, and being baptized by him. At one point, even Pharisees and other religious elites tried to get baptized by John so that they could claim him – though John had none of that!

With this sort of popularity, it would've been very tempting for John to claim to title of Christ. If he said he was the chosen one of God sent to free Israel from her enemies, he would've had a huge number of supporters. For a while, John would've enjoyed power and prestige, leading a popular revolt against worldly oppressors.

If you think about it, this is similar to Jesus' being offered the kingdoms of the earth and all their glory by the devil. If worldly splendor can be used to tempt the actual Christ, it could certainly also tempted the forerunner of the Christ. But in faithfulness and humility, John shuts down any of those ideas. He openly declares, "I am not the Christ." His pride would've delighted in a lie, but against that John confesses the truth.

His confession of truth is also against the temptation of fear. Opposite the temptation to lead the adoring crowds would've been the temptation to yield to these Jews who had come from Jerusalem to question him. Remember, these are the same Jews who will later seize Christ and put Him to death, both out of jealousy and also fear of the Romans crushing another messianic uprising. That same jealousy and fear could very well have been directed at John as well, and John no doubt knew it.

In fear, John could've denied having anything to do with any Christ at all, to say that he's just calling for religious renewal and a return to the traditions of the fathers. He might've told the Pharisees, "You like Moses, I like Moses; not trying to stir up any trouble," and then hoped they'd leave him alone.

But John doesn't do that. To be sure, this confession we hear today isn't quite as abrasive as him calling them a brood of vipers, as he'd done before. But there's still something in it they probably don't want to hear. Unfortunately our English translation doesn't quite capture it, but in the original Greek John's confession is more literally "I myself am not the Christ." It emphasizes that the Christ is in fact present; they've just got the wrong guy. John will carry on with his ministry of preparing people to meet this Christ, even if the powers that be would much rather he be silent on the whole matter.

Through John's example, we see then that our confession as Christians is to be made in faithfulness and truth, not changed by either pride or fear. Lots of things could tempt us to pride. We might boast in our good works, or in how long we've been a Christian, what a good example we give. And those things might all be true. But if we try to use them to get around God's word or say that they offset our sins, then our confession is not a faithful one.

Likewise, we might be fearful of making a true confession of our faith to certain people, like employers, or friends, or family. We might be tempted to go from the solid words of Scripture to more vague "values and morals." But God requires that we speak the truth. And when we do, we have His promise that He will work.

He promises much greater rewards than we could ever hope to get by pridefully elevating ourselves. And He promises to watch over and care for us when speaking His word brings us into conflict. Like John, we confess the truth and trust in God, and God will never fail us.

The second thing we see is how John confesses the truth in the way that best serves the truth. After hearing John confess that he is not the Christ, the priests and Levites asks, "What then? Are you Elijah?" John responds, "I am not." They then ask, "Are you the Prophet?" An even shorter response: "No." John clearly confesses that he is neither Elijah nor the Prophet.

At first glance, this might be a little confusing when compared to other portions of Scripture. For example, just last week, we heard how Jesus declared John to be a prophet and even more than a prophet. And elsewhere, Jesus declares that John is the Elijah who is to come. Does this mean that John is lying, or confused?

Neither, actually. This is where the importance of knowing and giving a confession in its right context is seen. When the Jews ask if John is "the Prophet," that's not just any prophet. That referred to a specific prophet foretold by Moses, which we heard in our Old Testament reading from Deuteronomy 18. If we consider that text, we see that the Prophet Moses foretold was in fact the Christ, who would serve as the Prophet above all prophets. Thus, John is not "the Prophet."

When it comes to Elijah, we need to consider the fullness of that prophecy as well. When the angel Gabriel foretold John's birth to his father Zechariah, the angel said, "and he (John) will go before him (the Lord) in the spirit and power of Elijah." John was not literally Elijah, coming back from heaven in a chariot of fire. Nor was John a reincarnation of Elijah, as reincarnation is a belief that goes against how God makes man as a unique union of a particular body and a particular soul. Rather, John was to be for the people in his day like Elijah was to the people in his day.

Another reason for why John confesses that he is not Elijah is seen in Jesus' own words about John. Jesus says, "and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come." A key phrase there is "if you are willing to accept it." The Pharisees were not willing, because that would mean that John's calls for them to repent were valid. Even later, when Jesus presses them, asking if they believe John's ministry was from heaven or not, they refuse to answer.

John's confession here is a good example of Jesus telling his disciples to not cast their pearls before the swine. They refuse to accept it, and so John isn't going to waste his time arguing with them about it.

John's example here shows us how to best present our confession to the world. Sometimes, God opens doors and gives us an opportunity to share the Gospel and the truth of the Bible. And in those times, it's important that we receive this opportunity as the gift from God that it is and take advantage of it. We read our Bibles and study the teaching of the Christian faith not only for our benefit but also for the benefit of our neighbor.

But other times, to present our confession would be like casting pearls before the swine, or like John explaining how he is the Elijah who was to come to a bunch of people who have already refused to repent and are more concerned with their report than the fact that the fulfillment of the Old Covenant is even then in their midst. You don't have to engage every argument on Facebook or at the coffee shop, especially with people who are just pulling stuff out of context. Nor do you have to try to convert every Mormon or Jehovah's Witness who comes to your door (though if you want to try, go right ahead!).

We don't lie or deny the faith when asked, but we can just say "Have a nice day" and go about your day. Like John, we confess the truth when and where the Lord gives us opportunity, and we pray for wisdom to recognize these opportunities.

The third and final thing we see is how John confesses the truth and holds it as more important than even himself as the one confessing it. The delegation from Jerusalem finally get a little frustrated and ask John, "'Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'" We have to have something to put on the paperwork!

To this, John finally gives a positive statement, and it's one of both humility and boldness. He replies, "'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said.'" The humility is seen in John characterizing himself as a voice. Not a prophet with a message. Not even a man speaking. He's just a voice, a sound crying out in the wilderness. A voice is important, not because of what it is, but what it says. John is confessing that he isn't important; his message is.

The importance of that message is then where John's boldness is seen. John doesn't say that he's a voice with some pretty useful ideas or helpful tips on living a better life. His message isn't an opinion. No, his message was foretold by none other than the great prophet Isaiah. John is confessing that, if you deny his message, you're denying the Scriptures themselves. And the content of the message deals with one infinitely greater than even Isaiah, namely the Lord Himself. John is confessing that his message is a divine message, given from heaven, to prepare the people to meet their

God. If they didn't want to listen to John, then they were going to have to answer to the Holy One of Israel. John's confidence wasn't in himself; it was in the God who had sent him.

This combination of humility and boldness is the final thing we learn from John concerning our own confession. Don't place your confidence in your own abilities or skills or place in life. If you do, the devil will be able to attack you with doubt, because you could always do better, or be better, and maybe you aren't good enough.

Rather, remember the word of God and what God declares of you. First off, God's word declares that you're a sinner. Don't try to excuse it or deny it; that just hardens your heart and gives the devil opportunities to attack you. Rather confess your sins. Admit to God that you have thought, said, and done wrong things, and ask for his forgiveness.

When you do, you can hear God declare that He has washed away your sins, paid every penalty, cleansed you from all unrighteousness. As a sinner who has been forgiven, you can then live in humble gratitude before God and humble confidence before the world.

When the devil, the world, or your own sinful flesh would try to make you wonder if you matter, then you can know that God Himself created you, you individually, and that he did so with a purpose. When doubts come as to why bad things are happening to you, you can look to your Savior on the cross, and see that, if God turned even the death of His Son to good, He will most certainly turn all things to good for those who are joined to Him. When the world seems full of trouble and sorrow and problems, you can hear your Lord tell you in His word to take courage, be of good cheer, because He has overcome the world.

And when death rears its ugly head, maybe in the death of loved ones, or maybe when it seems you're facing it yourself, you can have the confidence that Jesus has already overcome death, and for those who believe in Him, death is just the doorway from this life to the glory of heaven. None of these promises were earned by you, which would be cause for doubt, but they were all made to you by the God whose word cannot be broken.

Like John, then, you have the confidence that comes from the very mouth of God. Confess the truth, relying on God over pride or fear. Confess the truth when the Lord grants opportunity, asking for wisdom to know when to confess. Confess, knowing that you are who God has declared you to be, and nothing can change that.

In the name of Jesus, amen.