



# Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren

Continuing the Work of Jesus ....Peacefully, Simply, Together

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April 20, 2021

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren in the Diaspora.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Each week I begin these pastoral letters by referring to the Mechanic Grove Church of the Brethren in the Diaspora. Someone asked me this past Sunday what diaspora means. It was a term used to refer to the Jews who were living beyond the borders of Palestine. Sometimes the word used is dispersion.

In the epistle of James, James uses this term in his greeting in verse 1: 'To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion.' The King James Version states: 'To the twelve tribes which are scattered abroad'. The word diaspora is the original Greek word used in which the New Testament was written and was often used in its original Greek form to relate to the scattered Jews.

I used this terminology and related it to the members of the Mechanic Grove Church who were scattered due to the pandemic and not able to gather as one people in one place for worship as in normal times, similar to the Jews who were not all able to be together in Palestine.

This coming Sunday the third graders will be receiving their Bibles during the 10:30 worship service. My message is entitled "Who Do You Say That I Am?" based upon John 1:43-51 and Matthew 16:13-19.

The Church Board voted to reconsider the decision on summer outdoor worship services due to several concerns we received. Some expressed concerns about those who have allergies or difficulty navigating over the uneven grass and outdoor temperatures. The good feeling about the outdoor services last summer enabled all of us to gather in a setting that was not indoors. This summer the situation is a bit different with more people feeling comfortable about indoor worship.

Therefore, the Board approved that our summer services will be held indoors as normal at 8:15 and 10:30. However, three outdoor combined services will be scheduled for May 30, June 27 and the usual outdoor service on August 29. I trust this decision will be well received by our members as we look forward to wonderful worship services throughout the summer months.

For this week's piece of personal trivia, I wanted to tell you a bit about my dear wife. She was born Elizabeth Ann Rainbolt on December 7, 1951 in Logansport, Indiana. Her family called her Libby and she chose to call herself Lib. Her family were Hoosiers. When she was five years old her parents bought the Mont Joy Bulletin, a weekly newspaper and moved to Mount Joy. Lib

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graduated from Donegal High School, and then commuted to Elizabethtown College which is where we met in Concert Choir and started dating. She was an elementary education major. We married in January 1974 and we have three children. Lib worked part-time as a middle school language arts teacher at Kraybill Mennonite School where our children were enrolled. She later became the CEO of EMWALT Services, a family business in Hershey and then went back to teaching fulltime at Manheim Christian School as a middle school language arts teacher. Lib has had a horse most of her life. For a while she bred and raised miniature horses. Presently, she has a miniature horse, Winnie, and a prize winning Haflinger horse, Lietzl, which she rides and has shown in horse shows in Ohio, New York and Kentucky. Lib has been a tremendous support to me in my ministry and very dedicated to our children and grandchildren.

“May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen” Galatians 6:18.

Bob Kettering, Interim Senior Pastor

#### WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

- I. Over the last couple of months the sermons have focused on the ‘I Am’ sayings of Jesus. In those self-disclosure statements of Jesus, he sought to reveal some of his character and traits. This morning we will focus on a question about his identity that Jesus put before his disciples when he asked: Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

-in order for us to unravel the mystery surrounding the nature and identity of Jesus, I invite you to examine with me the text of Matthew chapter 16: verses 13-19 as we get some clues and eventually an answer to the question of who Jesus really is.

-first off, we will need to explore the setting and context of this dialogue between Jesus and his disciples regarding his identity. But in addition, we need to allow Jesus to ask each of us the question of who **we** believe Jesus is and give a personal response to his question.

-as we look at this text from Matthew chapter 16, we find Jesus asking two questions about his identity. The first question Jesus asks his disciples is this: “Who do the people say that the Son of Man is?” What’s the word out on the street of who Jesus is? Today Jesus might ask: ‘What are your face book friends saying about me?’ ‘What is the social media saying about the Son of man?’

The second question Jesus asks is similar, but more personal: “Who do you say that I am?”

- II. This text falls nicely into three parts: the context, secondly, the confusion, and thirdly, the confession

-what precedes this encounter of Jesus and his disciples in Matthew's Gospel is the beheading of John the Baptist in chapter 14 followed by the feeding of the 5,000, which is followed by a recounting of the story of Jesus walking on the water to the boat where the disciples were being beaten by fierce wind and pounding waves. This is followed by the story of the woman who touched the fringe of Jesus' garment and was healed.

-chapter 15 recounts the story of a young girl who was possessed by a demon which Jesus cast out and a recounting of many others who were healed by Jesus.

III. Listen to Matthew's words in verses 30 and 31 of chapter 15 And great crowds came to Jesus, bringing with them the lame, the maimed, the blind, the dumb, and many others, and they put them at his feet, and he healed them, so that the throng wondered, when they saw the dumb speaking, and the maimed whole, the lame walking, and the blind seeing; and they glorified the God of Israel.

IV. I am sure if you or I had been a part of that throng, and seen the signs which Jesus performed, or felt the healing touch of Jesus upon our own lives...that we too would have been wondering about Jesus...Who is this man? What is the source of his power? Who is this mystery man? The throngs of people had a multitude of questions about the identity of Jesus.

V. Many tried to answer the question: Who is this Jesus? Many readily identified him as the son of Joseph, the carpenter from Nazareth; but beyond that, the responses were diverse...a magician?...a prophet?...a huckster?...a rabbi?...a reincarnation of John the Baptist?...a philosopher?...maybe he is Elijah- the forerunner of the Messiah?...or an egomaniac?...or the prophet Jeremiah come back to life?...or could he possibly be the Messiah?

-the answers to the identity of Jesus abounded on every hand. It reminds me of the Lone Ranger TV episodes which I used to watch as a child. At the end of every program someone would raise the question: WHO WAS THAT MASKED MAN? And the answer always came back: WHY THAT'S THE LONE RANGER....and off he would ride into the sunset with his white horse rearing up on its hind legs with his trusted Indian friend, Tonto, at his side. Of course, today a masked man is not that unusual! It's part of our pandemic.

-it seems that the crowds were constantly questioning the identity of Jesus. And so, Jesus decided to deal directly with the question of his identity. Matthew tells us that Jesus chose the setting of the district named Caesarea Philippi as the location where Jesus would gather his disciples to discuss this question.

-I frankly never paid too much attention to the location Jesus chose or its significance in relation to the question of his identity. But historical research shows that Jesus probably had a purpose in choosing Caesarea Philippi to pose this question.

VI. As we continue to explore the context of this passage it is important to note that Caesarea Philippi is located 25 miles northeast of the Sea of Galilee. The population was mainly non-Jewish. It was a center of religious devotion for centuries of many different religions. The area was scattered with temples of the ancient Baal worship of the Syrians.

-William McClure Thomson, in his book: The Land and the Book, identifies no fewer than 14 such temples around Caesarea Philippi. There was no escaping the unmistakable influence of pagan Baalist worship in that region. The landmarks were everywhere.

-not only was the Syrian Baalist worship in abundance there; but in Caesarea Philippi there was a large mountain in which there was a very deep cavern which the Greeks had identified as the birthplace of the pagan god, Pan, whom the Greeks believed to be the god of nature.

VII. The Jews also considered it a holy place; for that same cave is the source of the Jordan River which would have great significance for devout and pious Jews.

-and lastly, Herod the Great chose Caesarea Philippi as the location to build a great temple of white marble to Caesar, where the emperor could be worshipped as a god.

-and so, it was into the setting of this sacred syncretistic city that Jesus chose to discuss his identity. Jesus chose the hub of the world's religions as the place to raise the question: Who do people say the Son of Man is? No doubt, that kind of a backdrop added to the dramatic intensity of his question. And that brings me to the second point of this text: The confusion.

VIII. There was a lot of confusion over the identity of who Jesus was. Matthew indicates that Jesus asked his disciples who the people were saying he was. The disciples answered: Some say you are John the Baptist; others say you are Elijah; some say you are Jeremiah or one of the prophets of the past.

-Jesus was surely not the first, nor was he the last to point people to God and gather around him a faithful flock of followers. Would he be just another one of the many great teachers who would take his place alongside Buddha and Mohammed, Confucius and Zoroaster? Was he just another one of the prophets who would take his place alongside Elijah and Moses; Jeremiah and Ezekiel? Would he be just another one of the great rabbis who would take his place alongside the rabbinic giants Hillel and Shammai?

-the truth is that many people had high regard for Jesus in his day; many perceived him as being a way to God and a beacon of righteousness; but few were willing to acknowledge that he was the long-awaited Messiah, the very Son of God. Jesus made it very clear that he was not just A WAY. But rather, THE WAY...the ONE and the ONLY way to God. Last week we heard Jesus say: "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life. No one comes to God but by me".

IX. In front of the Jewish council following Pentecost Peter proclaimed this about Jesus in Acts 4:12: There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved.

-the 1991 Annual Conference of the Church of the Brethren overwhelmingly affirmed: Jesus Christ is the Son of God and Savior of the world and the head of the church according to the scriptures.

-and yet, in spite of what Jesus declared about himself and in spite of what the scriptures clearly state; people in our own day and age also have many and varied answers to that question of who Jesus is.

- X. In 1906 that great medical missionary, musician and theologian, Albert Schweitzer, did extensive research trying to seek the identity of Jesus in his book THE QUEST OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS. In a similar vein, a few years ago some scholars sought to address that same issue of Jesus' identity with research called The Jesus Project in which they sought to ascertain if Jesus was actually an historical figure.
- the confusion continues among many in our day over the actual identity of Jesus. Some will say Jesus was a great moral teacher; many will say he was a good man...some would say he was a misguided martyr...did you know that even Moslems believe Jesus was a prophet according to the Koran? There are many opinions about Jesus today... many speculations but there is only one correct answer.
  - the thing which we must carefully guard against in our pluralistic culture, is falling prey to the opinions and doubts of scholars and skeptics: cynics and syncretists...irreverents and irreligionists. Many people want to embrace spirituality in our society but all too few are willing to embrace Jesus as their Savior and the only way to God.
- XI. The first question Jesus raises among his disciples in this text about who people say he is, is not really the most important question. The second question Jesus asks IS the most important question: Who do you say that I am?
- it ultimately does not really matter what anyone else says about Jesus or who they say he is. You and I must each answer that question individually.
  - you can say all kinds of things about what other people think about Jesus; but what Jesus really wants to know is Who do you personally say that He is? And that brings me to the third point of this text; The Confession. When Jesus put that question to his disciples, Peter said "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".
- XII. This text tells us that our discovery of Jesus Christ must be a personal discovery. When Pilate asked Jesus if he was the King of the Jews, Jesus asked him: "Do you say this of your own accord, or did others say it to you about me?"
- our knowledge of Jesus must never be second hand. It is not enough to merely know ABOUT Jesus, you must know him and experience him for yourself. Jesus Christ demands a personal verdict. You and I, like Peter, must personally confess him as Christ and publicly declare it.
- XIII. It is this confession that Jesus is the Christ, upon which the foundation of the church rests. The confession of Peter that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God, is the very confession which is at the center of the church; it is upon this confession of Peter which led Jesus to proclaim: "Upon this rock, I will build my church."
- XIV. This confession that Jesus is the Christ, is the rock upon which the church is built and upon which our salvation is secured.
- the very first question you are asked when being baptized is this question: Do you believe that Jesus is God's Son and do you receive Him and trust as your Savior?

-and when you answer I DO...that is the affirmation...the confession upon which the church of Jesus Christ is built...a personal affirmation and a public proclamation that Jesus Christ is God's Son...that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world...that Jesus Christ is Lord.

-but even more important than saying that Jesus is the Christ, is obeying him as the Lord of your life and following him in your daily walk. Let me close with two personal stories.

-the other year Lib and I were in Austria celebrating our 40th wedding anniversary. While there I visited Salzburg and just had to get a glimpse of the large cathedral in the center of the city. What I expected was a dark, damp, desolate cathedral. But what I experienced was a cathedral full of Catholic youth from Salzburg and Bavaria gathered on Pentecost weekend for a youth conference much like the Brethren NYC in Colorado.

-I was totally unprepared for what I experienced in this packed-out cathedral with thousands of young people, singing praise choruses and hearing sermons. But I was told to also come back later in the afternoon. Thousands of youths were singing about following Jesus and then the priest extended an invitation to any youth that wanted to commit or recommit their lives more fully to Christ to come to the altar in the chancel and surround the bishop who held high a golden cross. Hundreds of youths came forward to that invitation to follow Jesus and packed that chancel. It was an altar call like you would expect at a Billy Graham crusade. Youth who were claiming Jesus as the Christ and wanting to follow him as Lord.

XV. My final story relates to David Shenk who worked for Eastern Mennonite Missions in a ministry to Muslims. I was his pastor the other year at Mountville Mennonite Church. He recently wrote this book: Christian, Muslim, Friend, which Christianity Today named as Book of the Year the other year. David is so respected among the Muslim community even though he does not compromise the gospel message. One day he told me he was in the office of the Grand Mufti at Cairo University and David asked the Grand Mufti what message he should take back to his fellow Christians in America. The Grand Mufti said: "Tell them: Follow Jesus."

-do you need to commit or recommit your life this morning to following Jesus? You can do that privately in your heart where you are but if you want to do it publicly, I will invite you come forward while we sing and I will pray with you and for you.