

Who Are You?

The famous German philosopher, Arthur Schopenhauer, reportedly spent a night on a park bench, and the next morning he was aroused by an officer of the law who asked, "Sir, who are you?" Schopenhauer is reported to have said, "I wish to God I knew." Unfortunately, this is one of the biggest problems in our world. We do not know who we are. When we don't know who we are, nothing else falls into place in our lives. In John's gospel, we have completed our study of his magnificent prologue and we now begin our study of his narrative introduction to his gospel (John 1:19-2:11). John's first example of one who understands real discipleship is John the Baptist. In our text we will see that John is asked twice, "Who are you?" His answer is wonderfully clear and useful for us today.

John 1:19-28

19 And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" **20** He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ."

21 And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." **22** So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" **23** He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

24 (Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) **25** They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" **26** John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, **27** even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." **28** These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing.

I. John knew who he was biblically (vv. 19-23).

For the believer, we must go to the sacred Scriptures to find out who we are. There are many people in our lives who would like to define us, and sometimes we would like for others to define us. But the only one who can truly define us is the one who made us and who redeems us: God Himself.

- a. John knew who he was not (vv. 20-21).
The priests and Levites asked John if he was the Messiah, the prophet Elijah, or the prophet foretold in Deuteronomy 18:15-19. In each case John the Baptist answers, "No." For us, as well, if we are to be who we are supposed to be, we must renounce being who we are *not* supposed to be. The Bible tells us that we are not accidents of evolution, we are not sovereign lords, we are not here to serve ourselves. The biblical negatives are almost as important as the biblical positives.
- b. John knew who he was (vv. 22-23)
The priests and Levites continued to press him, "Who are you?" John then tells them that he is defined by Isaiah 40:3, "I am the voice..." John the Baptist found himself in the Scriptures, and we must too.

II. John knew who he was missionally (vv. 23-25).

In Isaiah 40:3, God is announcing that He will one day come in great glory to restore fully His previously exiled people. John is saying that his role in life is to announce this great Kingdom to all who will listen. He also is baptizing. In John's day, folks who were baptized baptized themselves, but John is baptizing others. And most significantly, in the first century, only Gentile proselytes were baptized upon their profession of faith, but John the Baptist is baptizing Jewish people! This suggests, of course, that Jews were not going to be citizens of the Kingdom merely because they belonged to the church through lineage and ceremony. Furthermore, John the Baptist called the people to full repentance in order to enter the Kingdom. We, too, have a clear calling from God. In

Acts 1:8, Jesus, before His ascension, says to His disciples, “But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses...” There are many occupations, but there is only one vocation, and that is to follow Christ and to proclaim Him to the world. Obviously, this vocation comes at great cost to everyone who will follow Him, and we remember that John the Baptist’s life ended in martyrdom at the hands of Herod and Herodias.

III. John knew who he was Christologically (vv. 26-27).

We notice that when John explains why he is baptizing, he says that there is one among them whom they do not know who is infinitely greater than even John the Baptist. We will remember that John the Baptist, Jesus says, is the greatest man ever born of a woman up until that time; but John the Baptist says that Jesus is so great that John is not even worthy of untying the straps of His sandals, a task that only a slave would perform.

The remaining question for us all is, “Who are you — really?”

Discussion Questions

1. If our lives must be defined by the Bible, how can we best grow in our knowledge of the Scriptures?
2. How would we think of ourselves were it not for the Bible? How does the Bible help us to understand who we are *not*?
3. What are some verses in the Bible that help you understand who you really are?
4. If we are all to be followers and witnesses of Christ, how do we best do that with the daily demands of life?
5. Describe an experience when you feel that you deeply grasped the all-surpassing greatness of Christ.

Going Deeper

1. At the deepest level, what most frequently displaces God’s word, God’s mission, and God’s Son as the defining realities of your life?
2. What can you do to be better able to answer, “Who are you?” with “I am Jesus’ disciple, servant, and worshipper”?