

RESPONSE TO DICK O. EUGENIO AND DIANE LECLERC
Evelio Vásquez, PhD, Nazarene Theological Seminary of Peru

I am deeply grateful to God for this conference and I would like to express my respect and admiration to the presenters of the themes they have raised. With the brothers and sisters in South America and all present in this special conference, we must listen again to the great question of our Lord Jesus Christ to his disciples near the great city of Caesarea Philippi.

Dick Eugenio has made a quick survey of the relevant literature, finding that the answers remain diverse both in personal opinions and in communities where Jesus Christ has been made known. I think it is a great question for this meeting of different people and communities of the world. Like the disciples, we may be able to give our opinion about what others think, our communities, but now, we have come together to answer for ourselves.¹

Diane Leclerc, under this same umbrella, leads us to the sanctuary of adoration, bearing in mind that the Word made flesh has two essential characteristics: His love and humility, traits that constitute Him to be fully human. Then, she masterfully describes the six characteristics, from His incarnation to His resurrection as the pathway to know him and perhaps to answer the question that bothers us and concerns everyone today.²

Starting from the gospels Dick Eugenio also leads us to know Jesus based on His relationships; His family nucleus, His parents and siblings; His Nazareth community and His relationship within the Trinity, standing out as the Son in His obedience to the Father, and as a human being, in His dependence on the Holy Spirit.³

¹ Dick O. Eugenio, “Who Do You Say I Am?”: The Trinitarian Identity of Jesus Christ. (2017): 1.

² Diane Leclerc, “The Humility of God: The Humanity of Jesus as Wesleyan Ecclesiology” (2017): 1.

³ Dick O. Eugenio, “Who Do You Say I Am?”: The Trinitarian Identity of Jesus Christ. (2017): 2.

Another element that fascinates me in Eugenio's paper, is that he draws attention to Jesus' itinerant ministry. It was not Jesus' plan to stay in one place and minister in a mega church accruing power and fame; He is the servant who walks about and spends energy and time, reaching out to the less favored, investing in those who were oppressed by the disloyal forces of humanity. He carried out the greater part of His ministry in Galilee, but made many trips to Judea and other places: to cite one of his extraordinary transcultural missionary journeys: "He had to go through Samaria" (John 4: 4).

To the excellent documents of Dick and Diane, I enclose some thoughts on the underlying question: "And you, who do you say that I am?"

The Occasion

The region of Caesarea Philippi was located in front of one of the most beautiful cities of that time, Caesarea. Herod Philip, son of Herod the Great, embellished and enlarged the city. Surrounded by a beautiful valley which gave rise to the river Jordan, some claim that it is one of the most beautiful places in the entire Holy Land. This was the setting, both quiet and welcoming, where one of the most outstanding theological conferences of all time took place. This conference was based on two questions: "Who do men say the Son of Man is?" (Mt. 16:13), a very relevant question, but which was connected to the underlying question: "And you, who do you say I am?" (Mt 16:15). On the part of the disciples and of us who continue, we would like to be satisfied with the four raised hands, resolving the matter easily but Jesus Christ, rather, the Trinity has constituted itself as the Board of Ministerial Studies, ready to examine the candidates to the ministry.

Apparently, they did not enter Caesarea even though they were very close, they went to Jerusalem. Jesus wanted them to arrive there, clear and sure about *who* they are going to

proclaim, *who* they are going to represent, when the ordinary people, when religious leaders, politicians and the most educated ask them what they think about Jesus. They needed to have the most powerful, biggest and deepest answer that has ever been known. The Creator God has revealed himself, he has identified fully with humanity to turn us to God, to redeem us for the purpose for which we were created.

The Popular Concept Today

Just like the disciples, we have our harvest of concepts of what people think in our communities and regions. In Latin America, we hear that many people qualify Christ as a Great Physician; campaigns and millionaire efforts are celebrated each year to highlight this quality of the Messiah. Others highlight the service, social responsibilities and strategies of structural changes as the greatest of Christ merits; another sector underscores Jesus' masterful teaching; and even the artists are stupefied with the beauty of the Redeemer. Asdrúbal Ríos says: "all the praises possible without recognizing that Jesus is God, are unimportant, even demeaning the dignity of Christ".⁴

An increasing number have proposed to take advantage of their abilities as Apostles and Prophets, attributing these titles beyond what they should be. In this context they have resolved that Christ is very interested in favoring us with material goods immeasurably if we chose to 'sow'. This way of conceptualizing or presenting Christ denigrates the Name of Christ the Son of the Living God.

The disciples shared what people thought about Jesus as a prophet - John, Elijah, Jeremiah or another. Still, how did His life, teachings and message affect society? His itinerant ministry made it possible for those who were oppressed, morally and emotionally damaged, to

⁴ Asdrúbal Ríos, *Comentario Bíblico del Continente Nuevo, San Mateo* (Unilit: Miami, FL.: 1994): 195.

have an opportunity to rehabilitate themselves and the oppressors to think and live differently. What is our responsibility as leaders of the church? How does the church understand and know Christ now?

The disciples did not bring any negative comments, they did not hear any among the townspeople, although they might be tempted to refer to what the clergy were saying, but at this time they were not allowed to make such comments.

The Substance of the Question

When Jesus Christ asks the final question, there is only one hand raised. It is easy to respond to what others say or think, answering for ourselves implies very serious and compromising responsibilities. Only Jesus and his disciples are there, but they blush when they cannot raise their hands as they did for the first question.

Imagining a bit the scene from our Latin American context, the faces of the 11 would be bowed down because they have no answer, they have not had time to review their notes of their previous classes that they have listened to over and over again for more than two years about the Person of their Master; they have seen wonders being done as they walked through the cities, towns and villages where Christ had walked with the people, opening His heart and attending to needs of all kinds. If they had had taken a little time to study and reflect, He would have got an excellent grade.

The contemporary apostles and prophets would do the same with this question; maybe we do not have the correct answer; we have stopped at the answers of others, or our answers respond to our interests; we have walked with Christ for some decades; but if we had an examination similar to that of the region of Caesarea, we too would have to bow our heads showing that it is not easy for us to answer the question presented in that occasion.

We love proclaiming that Christ listens and solves the passing problems of life; we invite Him to get into our boat to take us to the other side, or the port that we want to reach or the one that is most convenient. But to get to the point of Peter's declaration implies being 'quiet' as the psalmist in order to know God (Psalm 46.10) The clergy of the region of Caesarea Philippi, were taking part in a very significant and decisive evaluation for the future of the organization and the movement they would represent. We have the great privilege of representing a part of this body, the church of Jesus Christ. Personally, I still find it very difficult to answer this question.

As Eugenio points out, in his presentation, "our response to this question has radical ramifications about who we are, what we do and how we relate to Jesus." Jesus' messiahship implies both the promise of God and the hope of the people; Samuel Pérez points out that "the person and work of Christ is known as *Christology*, the body of followers ... *Christians* and the community practice - *Christianity*." Peter's statement goes back to the ancient announcements about the coming of a Mediator, of one anointed by the Spirit and of a Prophet for his people.

The saving dimension of Christ, Peter's confession later endorsed by the others, is guided and interpreted by Christ himself towards the way of the Cross, Pérez points out that "Christ is the fulfillment of the prophecies and execution of the promises."⁵ So we cannot take our eyes off Him; all our attention and hope in Him.

Disciples Like Christ

The proposal of this conference involves how we understand and embrace the likeness of Christ in light of this question today.

⁵ Samuel Pérez Millos, *Comentario Exegético al texto griego del Nuevo Testamento*. Mateo (CLIE: Barcelona2009): 1096.

1. Walking with Christ, involves walking in the paths of humanity. Christ became fully human to understand and help us. Identifying with Christ implies restoring humanity in ourselves and in others.
2. Being itinerant disciples: Christ left comfort and moved along the roads where people with the greatest need were to be found.
3. As Eugenio has pointed out, being obedient to the Father and depending on the Holy Spirit. But in his conclusive question he points out that, we must realize that there is a qualitative difference between us and Christ. Of course, it's hard for us to obey.
4. Being disciples like Christ, as Diane points out, has to do with adoration. How are we worshiping Christ the Son of the Living God?
5. To be a disciple similar to Christ is to be like Him in character, not only in power and skills.