

Chapter 2: Who Do You Say That I Am?

By Pastor *Jake Wilkinson*

My first job as a lead pastor started in January of 2020. Thank you. Thank you for the sympathy.

In March of 2020, something happened to all of our lives that none of us saw coming. Whatever our view on it, it affected us. Everything was different. I remember looking at our community and asking, “What can we actually do to help?” I was at a very small church — about 20 to 25 people — so hang on.

When COVID first happened, many of our elderly members served through our food bank and Meals on Wheels. A lot of them said, “We can’t do that anymore.” They stepped back, and suddenly drivers were needed. I said, “I can do that. I actually like driving.”

So I started delivering meals, and I did that weekly for four years. It was awesome. On one of my stops in Wheatley, I met a man who became a friend. He was blind, a disabled veteran, and had endured a lot in his life. He was not a Christian — that was apparent the moment you walked in the door and smelled things that made you think, “I hope I don’t get a contact high.”

We would sit and talk. Eventually he figured out I was a Seventh-day Adventist pastor, and he laughed at the top of his lungs. He said something like this: “All you churches are the same. You all think you have the answers. It’s like God is up there, and out of thousands of denominations and religions, you have to find the right one. Good luck.” Then he laughed even harder.

Lenny and I had that exact conversation 30 to 40 times over the years. But he has a point. Did you know there are roughly 45,000 Christian denominations? I’m glad you found the right one. And the right church within that denomination. You’re among the elect — you’re saved.

(Laughter)

Why do we laugh at that? Because some people actually believe it. Many denominations preach and teach that mindset.

But here’s the alternative: we swing the other direction and say, “Well, that can’t be true, so all 45,000 must be the same. It’s all fine.” Agreed? A couple of yeses — good.

I’m going to disturb you.

We protect against other denominations. There’s a church down the road, and we say, “Don’t go there. Come here.” We don’t like exclusivity claims, do we? Church should be for everybody. But was it designed to be?

I will tell you this: if you accept everybody, you will exclude people.

Last week we covered the why of church — that we’re a community, a family, that we actually need each other. We need human contact. Psychologists say some of the happiest moments in life are sitting around a table eating with people who love you and whom you love. No greater happiness. Our world has confused pleasure with happiness. They are not the same.

We have to have community. It fulfills something deep within us.

That said, community is messy. People are messy. There are awkward moments and hurt feelings. We give a stage to human beings — musicians, pastors. Personally, I sometimes feel like Moses, except opposite. Moses said he was slow of speech. I'm fast. I talk before I think. If God wanted someone methodical and fully thought-out, He would have chosen my wife. She's amazing at that.

Sometimes I feel like a loose cannon. Last week was one of those weeks. I said some things. I'm thankful I'm not alone — we have another leader here who did that too. Love you, David.

We stick our foot in our mouth sometimes. And yet God uses humanity anyway. We still have to figure out how to be in community.

This week we're not covering the why of church, but the who.

There's a statement by Jesus in Matthew 16: "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven." Does that disturb anyone?

We can react in two extremes. One is hyper self-consciousness — especially if you grew up in a context where this kind of language was used judgmentally. The other extreme is, "It doesn't really matter what we do. Jesus loves us." That's true — and yet Jesus makes exclusive statements about what it means to follow Him.

You still like me? Be patient.

Here's a simple definition of being a Christian: trusting Jesus to save you and living shaped by His teachings and His love. Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." If He is the way — the road — then following Him means walking that road.

Religious divisions have existed for a long time — within religions and between religions. Some people use religion for their own gain. Those people should be allowed in here.

One amen.

(Audience laughter)

They need Jesus too.

Some have authentically sought God. Others have used religion to control, manipulate, and harm. What about those people? They need church too.

Let's look at how Jesus viewed who belonged to His people.

In Jesus' day, Jews and Samaritans had deep hostility. Samaritans were outsiders — excluded from worship. There had been bloody conflict. Jews had destroyed their place of worship centuries earlier. Rabbis taught that Samaritan women were perpetually unclean — a false and harmful teaching.

I think Jesus got angry at religious leaders because they robbed people of salvation through distorted teaching.

Jews weren't supposed to associate with Samaritans. Men weren't supposed to be alone with women. And yet Jesus positions Himself at a well to meet a Samaritan woman who comes at noon to avoid others.

In John 4, He says, "Woman..." — which was actually respectful and affirming. He tells her a time is coming when worship won't be about this mountain or Jerusalem. "True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth."

True worship implies false worship. That's uncomfortable.

He says geography and race will soon be irrelevant. What matters is how you worship — the heart you bring. True worship aligns with God's nature.

He then reveals Himself as the Messiah. And He sends her back to her town, where she becomes the first evangelist, bringing others to believe.

So what constitutes God's true church? It's not just claiming His name. It's aligning with His character.

Many divisions are over trivial matters. Jesus' exclusivity wasn't about race, tribe, or preference. It was about truth and heart alignment.

Today we have political divides. "You can't be a Christian if you're part of that party." We laugh, but it's real.

Jesus chose a zealot — essentially a revolutionary — and a tax collector who worked for Rome. He brought extremes together under His lordship. Divisions aren't new. The issue is what we unite around.

The key question: Who do you say that I am?

When Peter said, "You are the Messiah," Jesus said, "On this rock I will build My church." Not on Peter himself, but on that confession.

Jesus tells us who He is throughout Scripture. God is not subjective. He is who He is. If Jesus is who He claims to be, then His way is truth. We don't get to redesign it to fit preferences.

Someone once said Jesus is the biggest victim of identity theft in history.

The term "antichrist" doesn't primarily mean openly opposed. It means "in place of." An alternate way that replaces His way.

That's where Jude comes in.

Jude, the half-brother of Jesus, writes that he intended to speak about shared salvation but instead urges believers to defend the faith. Some ungodly people had wormed their way in, distorting grace into a license for immoral living and denying Jesus by their lifestyle.

This is sensitive. Especially if you come from a judgmental background. But Jude is addressing people who manipulate religion for gain.

He references Cain, Korah, and Balaam — examples of making God in our own image. These are warnings about direction.

Faith isn't merely what you claim; it's the direction you're moving.

He describes grumblers, critics, those guided by appetites — often money, sex, or power. Not everyone who claims Jesus reflects His character. Discernment matters.

Imagine a mountain with many trails. Not all lead to the summit. When you realize a path doesn't align with God's character, you change direction.

The Bible often contrasts opposites to clarify truth — like complementary colors that make each other vivid.

In Galatians 5, Paul contrasts the works of the flesh with the fruit of the Spirit. We often skip the hard list. But conviction doesn't mean you belong to another spirit. Paul himself said he struggled.

The point is redirection. Worship in spirit and truth means aligning with Jesus' character.

Conviction is not condemnation — it is evidence of the Holy Spirit at work.

Let me share a story.

When I returned to church in my early twenties, I struggled with addiction. I couldn't give it up. I thought that meant I was lost.

One Saturday I almost didn't go to church. In the potluck line, the pastor put his arm around me and said, "How's it going?" I burst into tears.

He asked, "Is there a struggle going on?" Through sobs, I said yes. He replied, "Keep it that way."

I didn't understand at first. But the presence of struggle meant the Spirit was alive in me. Heaven and hell are at war for your soul. The goal isn't never struggling; it's keeping the battle alive.

The very fact that you feel conviction is evidence of God's presence. That's hope.

So when guilt rises, pause and thank God that your conscience is alive. The Spirit and truth are working to set you free.

Being a Christian isn't about perfect performance. It's about grace transforming direction. Trusting Jesus. Aligning with His character. Letting His Spirit move you toward life.

Let's pray.

Jesus, thank You for conviction, even when it's painful. Thank You for redirecting us away from harm and toward life. Sometimes we want what we want. But You've shown us what real life looks like.

Thank You for Your Son, Your instruction, and Your Spirit working within us.

In Jesus' name, amen.