

## WHAT'S IN A LABEL?

When I was in college, I went through a period of time where my relationship with my parents was rocky. I suppose that happens to most people at some point in their lives. But my parents decided to “teach me a lesson”. So, I went to work at Wayne Poultry in Decatur, working at the chicken plant where they debone chickens. I guess they wanted to show me what life awaited me should I choose not to pursue the path that they thought was best.

Not long after I went to work there, one of the guys that was an employee there, came up to me one day and asked, “Are you a Democrat or a Republican?” Now, I don’t talk about my political beliefs very often. Partly that’s because, as a pastor, I don’t want to alienate anyone. I firmly believe that regardless of a person’s political beliefs, they need to hear about Jesus Christ, so that’s what I want to talk about. Plus, I firmly believe in the separation of church and state. But I will tell you that I have never been particularly partisan. I tend to focus more on a candidate’s personality than the party to which they belong. I stand by that.

But there’s another reason I thought of this incident. Humans love to label people. Think about all the different labels we have. Political labels are just one example. We can label ourselves by our religious preferences. We can label ourselves by our social status or family status, by our race or gender. We can label ourselves by last name or by the job we choose. We can label ourselves by our level of education. Less significantly we can label ourselves by our hobbies or interests. We can even label ourselves by the team we support in the Iron Bowl.

It's funny, because these labels don’t really matter. Okay, Alabama or Auburn is kind of important, but other than that, what can you really tell about someone from any of these labels? None of the things that we say matter like intelligence, character, honesty or patience can be determined from the labels that we place on people. Yet, we continue to apply these labels as if they tell us something about the person in front of us. .

This isn’t anything new. The culture of Ancient Palestine was powered by a quest for honor. It’s important that we understand this concept if we are to have any hope of understanding what we’re reading in the bible. It’s important for us to understand what they understood about honor.

I asked the Sunday school class this morning for their definition of honor. The answer I got was similar to what I have written on this paper in front of me.

In our world, to have honor, is synonymous with having character. A person becomes honorable by having virtues such as trustworthiness, bravery and compassion and sticking to those virtues even when under stress. Much easier said than done. In the Ancient World, to have honor was to command the respect of the community around you. It meant to have an exemplary public reputation and to have others defer to your authority- whatever the source of that authority might be.

Now, if you think of honor in those terms, there are two ways to get that kind of honor. One is by ascribed honor. This is honor that is given to you by another party. This other party might be an honorable person. It also might be through a supernatural party: an angel, for example. You also might receive honor through the occurrence of a supernatural event: for example, the star and the choirs of angels singing at the birth of our Lord Jesus. I'm pretty sure that neither of those things happened when I was born, and I would be surprised to learn that they happened when you were born! But the bible says that happened when Jesus was born, so that ascribes honor to Jesus.

Another way to receive honor is through the game of challenge- riposte. We have this game- sometimes it's called tit-for-tat. This happens when someone presents a challenge to your honor. This could be an insult, it could be a physical attack, or it could be an attempt to humiliate them. Honestly, it doesn't even have to be a negative challenge. If you praise someone too much, for example, they might need to downplay themselves in order to maintain their honor. It would negatively impact their honor to be perceived as arrogant or narcissistic.

Now again, it's important to understand this concept to really understand the scripture, because so much of the scripture is steeped in this concept. Take this passage in front of us. It's really difficult to understand this passage, without understanding the concept of honor. In fact, to understand it we need to understand the concept of honor from several different points of view.

Starting with verses 6-8. The author begins by trying to establish John the Baptist's honor for the reader. The author tells us that John was sent from God to testify to the light so that all might believe through him. He wasn't the Light but came to bear witness to the light. So, the author is telling us that John has great honor because he was sent by God. Remember I told you honor could be ascribed by a supernatural party. John has honor just because he is sent by God. He had enough honor that he was chosen to testify to the Light. But his honor is not unlimited, because he himself is not the light. All of that is made clear in just those few verses that I read to you.

After establishing the honor of John, the author moves on to provide John's testimony. What he tells us further establishes John's authority by means of the challenge-riposte process. The priests and Levites come out from Jerusalem to question him. They issue a challenge to his honor. They ask him, "Who are you?" Now, that's an important question. The author of the book of John doesn't tell us about John's activities until this episode is over, but we know from the other gospels that John was baptizing people in the Jordan River. It's a reasonable assumption then that what they really mean when they say, "Who are you?" they want to know his identity so that they can establish that he has the authority to baptize people, give testimony, and call people to repent.

He answers them truthfully, "I am not the Christ." That's important because the Christ would have had the honor and authority to Baptize others as John was doing. Since he admits he's not the Christ, they press him. "What then? Are you Elijah?" And he said, "I am not." They

ask, "Are you the Prophet?" And he said, "I am not." They have listed three people who might have had the honor status to do what John is doing. He has denied being either of them.

Now, at this point, they must be feeling pretty good. They have issued a challenge to his honor. Rather than answering the challenge in a way that would save face for himself, he has answered in ways that diminish his status. He still has not established his own authority to say and do the things he has been saying and doing.

So, they continue to press him. "What then? Who are you, so that we may give an answer to those who sent us? What do you say about yourself?" John answered, "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord' as the prophet Isaiah said."

There are three things we need to note about this quote. First, if you remember last week, we made the claim that because so few people could read, quoting scripture showed that a person was relatively well educated, which conveyed honor in and of itself. Secondly, we should note that John is claiming his authority from scripture itself. He identifies himself as that voice crying in the wilderness. If true, that would grant him the necessary honor. Finally, he is saying that his honor comes from the person on whose behalf he is testifying. He has honor because he gives honor to God.

Apparently, this answer is not good enough for the Pharisees. They say, "Why then are you baptizing if you are not the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet." John doubles down on that third assertion. He says, "I baptize in water, but among you stands one you do not know. It is he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." The passage then ends by saying John was baptizing in a place called Bethany beyond the Jordan River.

Now, here's what I would say to you. Here's what I want to say to you and what I want you to understand. I have gone on record many times saying that Jesus gave the church three tasks to do: Make Disciples, Love one Another, and spread the good news. Those are the three tasks that Jesus gave the task to do. Those things may seem like a daunting task, at first. In fact, it's easy for us to start doubting ourselves. Make Disciples? How do I do that? I don't know how to do that. I have no training for it. Spread the good news? What would I say? I don't know enough about the Scripture to do that.

Here's the thing though. I would say that the arguments used by John the Baptist would work for you here. I'm not saying any of us hold the status of John the Baptist, and certainly none of us is the Christ. But any one of us can quote scripture, if we bother to read it (hint, hint, wink, wink, nudge, nudge). Pick this book up, blow the dust off of it, open it and read it. Then you can quote it just like anybody does. You have the authority to do that because Christ gave it to you when he told us to spread the good news.

Anyone can be a voice in the wilderness, calling out the name of Jesus. Your authority for that comes from the Scripture. It was given by Jesus Christ himself when he founded the church.

You don't need any fancy labels; you don't need to be the Messiah; you don't need to be Elijah; you don't need to be the Prophet; you don't need to be the preacher or the monsignor or the Pope or anything else like that to testify to Grace and Majesty of Jesus Christ. You don't have to be a minister to do that. You don't to be a priest or a Levite to do that. You already bear the only label on this Earth that really matters. You're a child of God. That's the only label that really matters. That's all the authority you need. You just have to believe.

When you testify to Jesus Christ, you do so from the position ascribed honor. You were given the honor necessary to speak with authority in his name. Christ gave you the only label that really matters. You are a child of God.