

# From Simon to Peter #11 - a Confession of Faith I

by J. Glyn Owen

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*Jesus asks his disciples to reveal their understanding of his identity, highlighting the importance of faith and commitment in following him.*

**Duration:** 45:27

**Scripture:** Luke 5:1

**Topics:** "Simon to Peter"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the passage in Luke chapter 5, verses 1-11, where Jesus performs a miraculous catch of fish. The preacher highlights Simon Peter's response to this miracle, where instead of being amazed and grateful, he recognizes his own sinfulness and asks Jesus to depart from him. The preacher emphasizes the significance of this response, showing that even after 18 months of being with Jesus, Simon Peter finally realizes the true identity of Jesus as the Son of Man. The preacher also discusses the geographical and spiritual setting of the event, highlighting the contrast between the pagan shrines and deities of the region and the revelation of Jesus as the true Lord.

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## Transcript

We are coming again this morning to yet another incident in the progressive experience of the disciples and especially of Simon Peter. Continuing our theme from Simon to Peter, we come today to the great confession of Caesarea Philippi. Let me qualify that.

We can't deal with this adequately in one sermon or during one service. So I would like to read now verses 13 to 16 only. I apologize for this because really the passage is one whole and deserves to be considered as one whole.

But this we can't really do. So we're going to divide it up and I trust that you'll all be back next Lord's Day morning in the will of God, that we should look at the concluding part of this very wonderful and very meaningful and relevant passage. We read then verses 13 to 16 in Matthew chapter 16.

When Jesus came into the coast of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples saying, whom do men say that I the Son of Man am? And they said, some say that thou art John the Baptist, some Elias, that is Elijah, and others Jeremias or one of the prophets. Now comes the thunderclap. He says unto them, but

who say ye that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, thou art the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

However you care to assess this remarkable episode that took place in the borders or in the districts of Caesarea Philippi, it is on any reckoning a very gigantic event. It marks a clearly distinguishable turning point in the ministry of our Lord. From that time forward he began to do something he could not do before.

We'll come to that later on, not today, another time. But so also does it mark a turning point in the spiritual pilgrimage of Simon Peter especially, probably of the rest of the eleven, though not Judas Iscariot, the rest of the eleven also. Now one word of explanation, especially for those that are student folk studying this passage, it is necessary to say that though there are superficial similarities between this episode and the one we were considering last Sunday morning, which you find in John chapter 6 verses 66 to 69, though there are similarities which are fairly obvious, and on the basis of those similarities some liberal theologians have assumed that they're but variant presentations of the one and the same event, we would believe to say that a more objective appraisal of the situation would have us believe that this is an entirely different incident.

Now this is a technical matter and so I don't want to take up your time with it, but let me ask you to notice just two or three things which are fairly conclusive. If the Gospel records are reliable at all, then will you notice that the event that we were considering last Lord's Day, recorded in John 6, 66 to 69, that took place in Capernaum. The three synoptic Gospels alike tell us that this one took place in the regions of Caesarea Philippi, and there are miles and miles between the two places.

Then again, here Jesus challenges his disciples as to who they think that he is. It's a challenge that is related to his person. There were no circumstances that made him, no outward circumstances that required him to make that challenge at that given time.

Everything is calm, but in the circumstance we were considering last Sunday morning, it was quite different. The crowds were going away, and Jesus turned to the disciples and simply said to them, Will ye also go away? He did not ask them, Whom do you say that I am? He simply asked, Will you also join the multitude? This is exceedingly important. There are other things too.

The content of Simon's words, because Simon was the one to speak out in the last occasion, as he is the one to speak out on this occasion, but the content of what Simon said, though related, is nevertheless quite distinct in the record of what we have before us today, and different from what we were considering last Sunday morning. Now that is on more of a technical side, but it is necessary for those of you who are trying to get a grasp of the main thread of Scripture, don't be bogged down by liberals who judge so oftentimes superficially, and are subjective in their attitude to Scripture. Examine the facts, and if you examine these facts, you will see that the record is very clear indeed.

This is a new situation altogether, perhaps related in point of time, and there are certain similarities, and yet it is different. Well now, following upon that general observation, we come now to the important episode before us today. This entire episode is made to hinge upon the direct probing of our Lord.

You notice that. I've already referred to the fact there were no external circumstances that required him to put this question at this particular time, but the need, the purpose, the reason for asking the question was in his own mind and heart. He believes that the disciples have now come to a stage in their ongoing experience when the question must be put.

Whom say ye that I am? He's probing. Do you know, it could very well be that some of us here this morning are in precisely that situation. We've been following afar off, or a little nearer at times, over a few months, maybe years, who knows.

There are times and seasons when the Lord draws near to men and women, and he probes, and he says, now come, you've had a long time to think about this. You know something of me, and you know something of my work, you know something of my word, now come. I have a reason at this time for putting the question to you directly.

You may not realize the significance of it, but Jesus comes and he says, now look, whom do you say that I am? And if only we could appreciate it. Everything depends on the answer to this question. Everything.

Now as to the singular importance of this question and of the issues then, there can be no reasonable doubt at all. And our Lord was aware of it, of course, that he was addressing to these men the most important question they've ever been asked. And I believe it is on that account that he takes so much trouble to provide the proper setting for his question.

And this is going to be our first point this morning. The setting arranged for this vital question. Verse 13.

Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, whom do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? Or whom do men say that the Son of Man is? You probably should read in that way according to the best manuscripts. Now, whereas we have often had occasion to notice our Lord's ability revealed in the setting of the stage for different events, I don't think you will come across another incident, even in the whole of the New Testament, that compares quite with this. You see, Jesus is Lord.

And as Lord, he arranges the setting for questions he wants to put, for actions he wants to make, for things he wants to do. He arranges the stage. He arranged the stage for his own crucifixion.

I hope this is noticed as we read the Gospels. This is not my subject this morning. He arranged the time.

It was he who forced them to an issue. He withheld things for a certain time, and then he pressed forward, and he pushed them, and he made them decide. He made them come out.

He took matters into his own hands. In other words, he arranged the timing, he arranged the stage, and at the proper time, he handed himself over. He's Lord of circumstances, even as he lives in the flesh.

If we miss this, we miss something of the glory and of the grandeur of the Gospel story. Now, I suggest to you, nevertheless, that you don't find anything quite as wonderful as this. And therefore, I want to stay with it a little while.

I want to paint the background, because I suggest to you that the question is all the more significant, and the reply all the more wonderful, in the light of the setting. I want to say a word about the setting geographically, spiritually, and comparatively. First of all, geographically, we can dispense with this quite simply.

Matthew and the other two synoptic Gospels place the event in the neighborhood of Caesarea Philippi. Now, this was a little town at the foot of Mount Lebanon, in the northeastern tip of the country. It was neighboring on Syrian territory.

There are many things that are dependent upon this. One, he was there outside, outside the area covered by Herod, Galilean Herod. He was in comparative quietness and peace.

He was far away from Jerusalem and its hubbub, where he was certainly hated at this time. Even away from and the multitudes who disbelieved, and the crowds who retreated from him. He was now away in a remote part of the country, which was populated almost 50-50 by Jews and Gentiles.

So you see, it is once again as if Jesus has retreated into an area away from the focus of the gaze of the multitude, away from the center and the hubbub of things, to a place of comparative quiet, comparative ease, where Jew and Gentile population dwell together, so that he's not simply the object of Jewish enmity and suspicion. And after a season of prayer, Luke 9, 18, there in this quiet place, comparatively quiet at any rate, he poses the important question, so much about it geographically. Now spiritually, if Caesarea Philippi was removed from the main action of Jewish life and Jewish religion, it had its own glut of spiritual interests and associations.

No area in the entire country was quite like this, because of its spiritual associations. It presented a richly meaningful background. Let me just paint in, etch in, a few of the significant things.

In his quite renowned book, *Land of the Book--Book with a capital B*, the *Land of the Bible--Thomson* illuminatingly records how this entire area around Caesarea Philippi was dotted with shrines and with temples of various kinds. For example, he enumerates at least fourteen shrines to the old pagan Syrian god or gods that bore the name Bel. Now, readers of the Old Testament are very familiar with this.

The old Bel of the Old Testament was a Syrian concept. And here, around Caesarea Philippi, here there were at least fourteen shrines dedicated to the worship of the pagan god or gods, as you would have it, Bel. Not only that, but in a cavern in a hillside near Caesarea Philippi, it was alleged that you had the birthplace of the old Greek god of nature, Pam.

Now, just as Bel was a mythical deity, having no objective reality, so also Pam. Pam was a mythical deity, a concept of the human imagination and poetic genius. But he had no objective reality.

And yet, here it was alleged Pam, the great Greek god, the god of nature, had been born, and a shrine had been built to his memory and to his worship. Now, it was because of this association with Pam that Caesarea Philippi, as we speak of it, had previously been called Baniyas, and has since been called Pania. And the reason is because people believed that somehow or there was something to this legend that Pam, the great Greek god of nature, was born there.

One other thing. Another imposing edifice in the town was the white marbled temple dedicated to the cult and the worship of the Roman emperor. I suppose this was about the most imposing of all the many buildings that surrounded this area and were found in Caesarea Philippi.

This had been built by Herod the Great, but it was his son Philip who had made it the artistic thing it was in this particular day. He had spent so much money upon it, money that might well have been given to the poor, as has happened in other countries at other times. Money that might have been spent to help people feed themselves a little better and clothe themselves and house themselves, had been diverted to this worship of the Roman emperor.

The reason is obvious. The person who erected the temple had something to gain, or he had gained something, and it was a kind of thank offering. Now because of this, its name had been changed from

Banias to Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea, in order to link it with the Caesar. Philippi, in order to link it with Herod's son Philip, and thereby a Caesarea Philippi, to distinguish it from another Caesarea on the western coast, mentioned in Acts chapter 10 and verse 1. Now have you got a little of the picture? Here is a place where you have fourteen or so shrines to the pagan Syrian deity Baal. Here is supposed to be the birthplace of the pagan Greek god Pan.

Here is the place where the emperor of Rome is worshipped and honored and respected. It's a center of Romanism, politically speaking. Here, therefore, is a background of deeply religious significance, with each feature lending its own hue to the vital question Jesus was about to pose concerning himself.

Here, in Caesarea Philippi, addressing himself to a people that have been reared and nurtured in the knowledge of the God who is, the God who was before the beginning and will be after the end, the God of creation, and the God of history, and the God of judgment, and the God of redemption. Here, addressing himself to a people that have been nurtured in this knowledge of the true God, Jesus now looks them in the face, against this rich background, and says, Now, whom do you say that I am? Let's look at it again comparatively. Obviously encouraging them to compare and contrast him with these pagan deities worshipped by men in their ignorance.

You remember that Jesus' first question was not, Whom say ye that I am? But rather, Whom do men say that the Son of Man is? Whom do men say that the Son of Man is? Now, let's be clear about this. Even if he did not put it as the King James Version says, Whom do men say that I the Son of Man am? The disciples understood it in that sense. And they understood he was referring to himself, even if he did not make it absolutely clear.

And so their response was to that effect. The report of the Twelve is illuminating. It makes it clear that men generally, despite what happened as recorded in John 66 to 69, our last week's episode, despite the retreating of the multitude around Capernaum, men generally have a most elevated view of our Lord.

Now, just look at it. We're not going to dwell in any detail upon this, but just look at the terms. Whom do they say that he is? They said, the disciples reported, Some say thou art John the Baptist.

I don't need to remind you that to that day and age, John the Baptist was the one figure who was the obvious mouthpiece of Jehovah. John was not the representative of a dead deity, of a conceptual God, a God who's a mere notion in the mind. They knew that.

John wielded an axe of a power that was not of men, but of the living God, and they knew that. And somehow or other, they felt in the words and in the works of Jesus, here is token sufficient of the fact that he represents not a dead deity, but God. Some say thou art John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah, or at any rate, one of the prophets.

Now, such views were essentially respectful, and may I add, thoughtful, because there were evident features in our Lord's life and or his work, which resembled this or that facet in these lustrous names that they bring forth. Of course, Jesus was like John the Baptist. He preached the same message to begin with, that the kingdom of God, the kingdom of the heavens has come.

He took on, he took John's very text and preached his opening sermons on the same text. And he showed how close he was to John the Baptist in many, many ways. So also was he an Elijah.

I referred a little moment, a little while ago, to the fact that here in this district in Caesarea Philippi, you have the worship of the Syrian God there. Do you remember Mount Carmel? Do you remember how Elijah gathered the Baals and the prophets of Baal together? Do you remember? Do you remember that great challenge? So is Jesus challenging the false deities. And there was something of this about him.

Whenever he met demon-possessed people, he exorcised them. He tyrannized the devil. He redeemed men from the grip of evil and false deities.

There was something of Jeremiah in him too. Jeremiah was the weeping prophet. We learn that this, our blessed Lord Jesus Christ, shed his tears.

A tearless Savior wouldn't be very much use for men and women that have so many heartaches as you and myself. And so they saw, some who were of the common people, saw that there was a resemblance between him and John the Baptist. There was a resemblance between him and Elijah, or Jeremiah, or if he's not one of these raised from the dead supernaturally and sent back to finish their work, well then, at any rate, they said, he's in line, in the line of the prophets.

And you see what they're saying? They're saying that he's not on the same level as the scribes and the Pharisees and the leaders of contemporary religion. They say, the common people say, at any rate, he's one of the great prophets of God. And if he's not one of them risen from the dead and come back to us, then he continues the line.

They didn't know him, but they'd watched him and they'd heard him, and that was enough. And against that incomparably rich background of pagan shrines and mythical deities, or that of a deified human, the emperor, and then the acknowledged testimony of folk generally, Jesus now turned to this little handful, this little remnant group, as we spoke of them last week, this little group of twelve men and one of them was a devil, and he looked them straight in the eye and said, now all right, in this setting, against this background, in the light of what men think of me now, now, whom do you, you've been with me for, for over 18 months, you've followed up my heels, we've lived together, we've dined together, we've walked together, we've talked together, we've prayed together, we've lived together, we've faced opposition together, we've done everything together for 18 months now, tell me, whom do you say that I am? And we come next to the substance of the answer which Simon gave. True to his nature, Simon is first to speak.

True to his nature. I suppose it's the same still. There are those who will always be the first speakers, always have the first words said, part of nature, nothing wrong necessarily in that.

But Simon was the first to speak here, as he was in the incident last week and on other occasions. Up he comes and out comes what is on his heart. And I want you to notice, there is more significance to this than meets the eye.

Simon doesn't need any time to consider this question. That's the point. It is already, the answer is already formulated in his heart and in his mind.

Jesus is not presenting him with an issue that is altogether new, nor is he pressing for a quick reply without having given due time to the twelve to conclude as to who he really was. Jesus is not pressing like an evangelist, pressing for a decision. Look here, you may only have come in and heard the gospel for the first time, but you must decide, this is the hour.

He's not doing that. They've been with him for 18 months, and they've been listening for 18 months, and they've been watching for 18 months, and after 18 months the Son of God now says it's time. Whom do you say that I, the Son of Man, really am? Moreover, Simon, in particular, had already given various unsolicited indications of his view of Jesus during the preceding months and weeks.

Now may I remind you of one or two of these, because it is important. I think that this has got something to say to us as a church about methods of evangelism, for example. This is our theme on Wednesday evenings, in part, but let me say it here this morning.

I believe, respectfully, without quarreling with other people, but respectfully, I believe that we can press people to make a decision which is before time, premature. And a premature decision is a problem in itself, and it genders more problems in due course. Jesus waited for 18 months before he pressed for a confession, and I'm not sure that any of us are better equipped to press men than he was.

Now, Simon Peter has already indicated, you see, that he knew the answer already, and this is important. Important to indicate that Jesus is not pressing him to do something that he was not prepared for. Now let me just briefly remind you, you will remember how, for example, following the supernatural haul of fish, Luke chapter 5, verses 1 to 11, we consider this.

You remember they caught nothing all night. Jesus was first taught from Simon's boat, and then he says to Simon, launch out, cast out the net, and lo and behold, the poor net was about to break, and the poor boat was about to sink with a haul of fish in it. You remember Simon's response? What did he say? Oh wonderful Lord, I don't need to go out fishing for a long time now, you've got such a marvelous haul, my balance will bulge.

He didn't say anything of the kind. Do you remember what he said? Depart from me, O Lord, for I am a sinful man. If ever there was an awareness of the dignity and of the deity of the man Christ Jesus, there it was.

You great mighty worker, don't come too close to me because you're so different from me. I'm not worthy of it. Keep away.

Much as I know that you only have the words of eternal life, don't, don't come too near to me. You may become contaminated with the person I am. You know anything of that? But you see, he was tumbling towards the truth.

Take another incident. The following, you remember, the rescue of the boat caught in the storm, Matthew 14, we've been through that. The rescue of the whole community of the boat and all the members, and especially of Simon, who tried to walk on the waves after his Lord.

You remember, out down to the chin, the master saved him in due course, brought him up again. You remember what happened at the end of that? We read in Matthew 14, 33, and those who are in the book worship him, saying, truly, you are the Son of God. Ah, it's dawning, little by little, a chink of light here and another from there.

This incident and that incident, and then of course you remember last week, John 6, 66 to 69, it's another case in point. As the disgruntled, disbelieving crowd around Capernaum are moving away, Jesus said, do you really want to go, you twelve? You see, I can't compromise my message even to keep you. If you want to go, well, then you must.

I have no other word. This is the word of God. This is the message.

Will you go also? And dear Simon said, oh, Lord, he says, Lord, to whom shall we go? There's no one else. Thou, and the implication is thou only, hast the words of eternal life. There's none other like you.

Well, what about the parishes? What about the scribes? What about the Sadducees? What about the scholars? What about the people that have passed through the theological colleges of Jewry and are authorized to teach and to preach as Jesus was not by man? No, Sir Simon, none of them are where you are. You stand alone. You have the words of eternal life.

You see, it's coming. But now the time has come, as Jesus alone judges and has the right to judge and assess, the time has come when all these inklings and notions and ideas moving towards the truth, perhaps, they must now be put into some sort of creedal form, and they must be led not under the pressure of an external need, but in response to the Lord's own question. No, no, Jesus is not pressing for a decision they have had no time to consider or a confession they have had no opportunity of formulating, but against the background of their evidently heartening convictions, convictions already casually heard to fall from their lips, Jesus would now make them crystallize and express their honest views of him in the calm atmosphere of that eloquently meaningful context.

Now look at Simon's reply, and we can only deal with it very briefly this morning. That is very wonderful. Now I hope as I deeply try to expound this passage that every man and woman among us in the gallery and downstairs, I trust that in your heart this morning you can follow Simon.

Now let's do this this morning, let's do. Forget about the man in the pulpit, I know you're hearing me, I'm making such a noise, but now forget about me for a moment. As you hear the words, think of the Lord.

He's coming to us and he's meeting us from the tomb. As the hymn said. And he's coming to ask you this morning, who did you say that I am? And if you can, make Simon's meaningful words your own, not just repeat them, I don't mean that, but say them from the heart.

Oh may God grant us. May this be a confessing church this morning. No, no, we're not standing to make a confession together, all saying the same words at the same time.

We're not doing that, that's far too formal. But what I'm asking is this, if you can find it within your soul by the Spirit of God, tell him I believe it too. What did Simon say? Let's divide it into two.

Says Simon, without any equivocation or qualification, without hesitation or ambiguity, Simon has opened his life and bared his soul, without an if, without a but, says he, thou art the price. Well those words take us back a long time you know, 18 months at any rate. They take us back to that exciting moment we were considering earlier on in our series when Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, who'd spent a little time with Jesus, came bungling back into Simon's room or somewhere where Simon's was and says, Simon, Simon, Simon, we found the Messiah.

It took Simon. Found the Messiah. And Andrew was certain and he was excited about it, as you'd expect a man to be who'd really found the real Messiah.

But much water has flown under the river since then. Simon himself has followed and heard and beheld and witnessed the teaching and the works and the words of our Lord. He's seen him, he's watched him, he's lived with him.

Now says Simon, not because Andrew told him 18 months ago, but because he is inwardly convinced of its truth. Thou art. It's not men think, it's not I think, it's not we think.

Thou art. The Messiah or the Christ is the anointed of God. The anointed of God as prophet to teach, as priest to make the sacrifice for sins, and as king to reign over men so that bringing his, in his community, his kingdom with him, he shall bring them home to glory.

That's the Messiah. He's the prophet, he's the priest, and he's the king. In other words, he is everything he needs to be to save us to the uppermost.

I can't enlarge upon the concept today. And Simon has at least come here. He may not be sure of everything that is implied in Messiahship.

Indeed he wasn't. We shall see that a little later on. But there was one thing he was sure about, Jesus is that person.

He may need much further education and he will have to be handled carefully by the same sovereign prophet, priest, and king. But he knows that Jesus is none less and none other than the very promised and anointed one of God. Thou art the Christ.

And the other matter that I can, I want to deal with in closing is this. He adds to that, you are the Christ, the son of the living God. Please notice, Simon links Jesus directly with God.

What God? Which God does Simon link Jesus with? The Syrian bale? No, he doesn't come into it. The Greek pan? He doesn't come into it. The emperor? Doesn't consider it.

His breath fails in his mouth. And though he may make an awful lot of noise today and rule the world, he's gone tomorrow and withered like the grass of a field, which today is and tomorrow is cast into the oven. Thou art the son of God.

What God? The God of creation. The God who called Abraham out from a state of paganism and led him a thousand miles along the Euphrates Valley into a land he knew not where he was going, only knew that the almighty God was leading him. The God who gave him seed contrary to nature, supernaturally.

The God who sustained him when there was no one else to stand by him. The God who sent the law to Israel. The God who guided them by kings and judges and taught them by the prophets.

God, the living God, the real God. Now, says Simon, Jesus is related to God. Neither does he leave it at that.

It is as if he, for one, had beheld the significance of the eloquent setting chosen for this occasion, and he recognized the sheer depth characterized the Syrian death, the Greek pan, and the Roman emperor alike, and all other supposed deities. And he puts it like this. Jesus, Jesus is related to the living God.

The self-sufficient God. The eternally I am God. Relate Jesus to these other people, these other supposed God, would be sacrilegious and idolatrous.

On the other hand, he is related to the living God who gave all things, made all things, and sustained all things. And then the last thread is this. How is he related to that one God, the true God? Well, says Simon, he's not a distant relation of his.

We all have distant relations, don't we? Fourth and fifth cousins. You don't see them very often, but sometimes they turn up from somewhere or other. May I say it reverently? Simon saw that Jesus was not a distant relation even of a true God.

How is he related to him then? Well, says Simon, he's the son of the living God. He shares his nature. He shows forth his glory.

He is the son of the living God. Now, I don't have more time to add more, but you see what's happened? Oh, we've come a long way. Do you remember how the ministry of our Lord Jesus started on Jordan's bank? Following upon the baptism of the sun, heard a voice from the highest glory saying, this is my beloved son in whom I am wealthy.

The father testifies to the son, you are my son. And Simon, the pilgrim disciple, blunderer, arrogant, wayward, that he was so often. Simon has come to the point where he sees the Lord Jesus to be exactly what God said him to be.

My friend, have you come there? You who've worshipped perhaps in this church for many years, or a few, it doesn't matter. Elsewhere perhaps. You who've not been coming to church for very long, but you've been reading your Bible, and you've been watching the Christians, and you've been reading Christian history perhaps, and the history of the church.

And you know something of the great missionary escapades of the Lord Jesus, working by his spirit and his word through feeble men. And you've had a sneaking feeling there's no one else quite like him. Tell me, can you put it into Simon's words this morning? Has the hour come for you to echo these great, these magnificent words? Thou the Christ's son, the only son, not a son, the son of the God who ever lived, saved, and with prayer and adoration and confidence may the Lord enable us in such faith to launch out upon a new week, and to look our difficulties in the face, as these disciples now began to do in a new way, knowing this, if we have with us the less time.

Prophet, priest, son of the living God, then neither in life nor in death need we fear, give all to the praise of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Ghost. Amen. Father in heaven, we are conscious that we move this morning into the most sacred territory.

As we consider these eventful days in the history of thine apostles in the making, give us the sense of the greatness of it, and the significance of the occasion for them, and of this occasion for us. O spirit of God, enable us out of the heart's conviction to say, not perhaps we've indicated in some way or other many times before, but may it be today, our grand personal confession of faith, that will stand and need no revision as the days go by. We ask it in our Saviour's holy name.

Amen.

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