

Outrageous!
Extraordinary Claims
April 5, 2015

PRELUDE – What a Savior
Worship – What a Savior / Jesus Paid It All
Video – Light Shines
Worship – All Because of Jesus
Feature – “We Believe” (Bethany)

Good morning everyone.

I want to begin this morning with a question.

If you had to boil it all down to just one thing, what would that one thing be? If someone came to you and asked you to describe what – at the core – Christianity is all about in one simple thought or one simple phrase – maybe even just one word, what would you say?

- I think some of us might say Christianity is all about *The Golden Rule*: “Treat others in the same way you would like to be treated yourself.” And that certainly is a good idea. The world would be a much better place if we all did.
- Some of us might say that Christianity when you boil it down is all about *love*: “God loves and accepts us just as we are and therefore we should love and accept others in that same way – just as they are.” And again, if people actually did that, our world would certainly be a much better place.
- Some of us might say Christianity is about *belief in a set of theological and philosophical propositions* much like those expressed in the song we just heard (which draws upon the Apostles Creed).
- I think some of us might say that Christianity is primarily about *developing character and conviction*: “doing the right thing; the noble thing; the hard thing; the best thing regardless of what it costs.” And there certainly is value in living that way. It really doesn’t matter what you believe if it doesn’t also influence your behavior.

If we had the time, we could add even more possibilities to this list. We could also suggest negative words and phrases such as “intolerance” or “hypocrisy” or “unscientific” or “foolishness.”

But let me pose the question in a slightly different manner.

Suppose that we were not in the comfortable confines of this building in the safe suburban Northland of Kansas City. Suppose, instead, that right now we were in a church building in the war-torn country of Iraq where ISIS is in control of vast areas of land and people. And suppose that sitting in front of you or behind you is an English-speaking Iraqi Christian. And suppose you could ask them what Christianity is all about. What do you think they would they say?

I think that’s a good question because, these days, to be a Christian in Iraq is very different from being a Christian in the United States. While it is obvious that Christianity is rapidly declining in favor and influence in this country and it’s

getting more difficult, the experience of Christians here is nothing like that of Christians in Iraq (and Syria, Afghanistan, Iran, Yemen, Saudi Arabia and, of course, Kenya). In the words of Canon Andrew White, an Anglican pastor who is known as the Vicar of Baghdad (because he oversees Anglican pastors and churches there) ... “*it is so awful.*” And it’s awful because in Iraq, as in other parts of the world, there is extreme persecution of Christians.

But persecution has a way of sharpening the focus; of narrowing things down to what really matters most. In times of persecution you have to ask yourself: *what are you willing to suffer for and possibly even die for?*

So what are Iraqi Christians willing to suffer for? What is their faith all about?

I’ll let the Vicar explain in his own words ... and see if you can figure it out.

Video Clip – “WE LOVE YESUA” (2.3 min)

(Begin) White: “They came and they hounded all of them out.”

(End) White: “That’s what we *are* going through.”

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 1>

It’s hard to watch that and not be moved, isn’t it?

Part of the reason I showed you that clip is because I want to raise awareness of what’s happening to Christians worldwide. From imprisonment to torture to beheadings, more Christians around the world live in fear for their lives than at any time in the modern era.¹ And something must be done to stop it.

But the other thing I want you to see is that, in Iraq (and in many other places where persecution is rampant) ...

- As much as Christians are committed to living according to the Golden Rule ...
- As much as they are committed to loving *even the members of ISIS* who are killing their families and friends (and it’s amazing to hear those stories – just Google “Vicar of Baghdad” sometime and you’ll hear all about it) ...
- As much as they believe in the classical doctrines of Christianity ...
- And as much as they are obviously striving to be people of character and conviction ...

For them, what – at the core – Christianity is all about is one word ... a name ... Yesua ... Jesus. “We love Yesua” they said.

Jesus of Nazareth is what Christianity is all about for them.

And they’re right for without Him, there is no Golden Rule. Without Him, there is no commandment to “love one another as I have loved you.” There is no Apostles Creed to believe in. There is no perfect and ultimate example of character and conviction in the middle of the worst kind of torture.

Without Jesus there is no Christianity. Without Jesus there is no church. Without Jesus, you and I (whether we’re believers or skeptics) have no reason to be sitting here this morning. It all comes down to Jesus.

Of course, that’s not really a *new* thought. Well, maybe it is here in the United States where what passes for Christianity is often just a version of Moralistic Therapeutic Deism – the belief that there’s some kind of generic “god” out there

somewhere (that's Deism) ... who just wants everybody to be nice and get along (that's the Moralistic part) ... and who only shows up when we need some help but otherwise has no expectations of us (that's the Therapeutic part).

But Christianity – true Christianity – as it is presented to us in the New Testament (the writings of those who were there in the beginning) is at the core about one thing: *Jesus*. And everything else flows from that.

That's why the Apostle Paul – the most effective Christian missionary who ever lived – once wrote to a group of first-century believers:

When I first came to you, dear brothers and sisters, I didn't use lofty words and impressive wisdom to tell you God's secret plan. For I decided that while I was with you I would forget everything except Jesus Christ, the one who was crucified.
1 Corinthians 2:1-2 (NLT)

It all begins with Jesus and it flows from there.

Like No One Else

Of course, someone might say, “OK, Rick, I see your point. But I'm not so sure that's as big of a deal as you seem to be making of it because there are other religions in this world – major religions – that are also about a person. Islam rests on the Prophet Muhammad. Buddhism rests on the Buddha. Take those men away and those religions, too, have no reason to exist. Just as Christianity would fall without Jesus, they would also fall.”

And that's true.

However, there is a world of difference between Jesus and Muhammad and the Buddha and, in fact, any other spiritual leader or guru or whatever you want to label that role. Even a casual comparison will reveal an astounding truth ...

... namely, that what Jesus claimed to be true of himself – and what his followers claimed to be true about him – is like nothing that has ever been claimed by or for any other spiritual leader in human history.

What Jesus and his followers claimed to be true of him is like nothing that has ever been claimed by or for any other spiritual leader in human history.

Now, that's not to say those claims are accurate. That's another question altogether. But the undeniable reality is that *there has never been any other person like Jesus*. To assert otherwise – to say that Jesus is just one more in a long line of great religious leaders – is to choose to ignore the truth.

And I know there are some who will claim that He never even existed and that the whole story was made up decades later to justify the existence of the church. But the burden of proof on *that* claim (which, by the way, is no longer advanced by even the most liberal of historical scholars^{ii iii}) is much weightier than the assertion that a simple carpenter named Jesus from the town of Nazareth in Galilee walked this earth in the first century; and that He did and said some of the most outrageous things ... *including an astounding number of extraordinary claims about Himself*.

We could spend a lot of time looking at those claims in great detail but let me try to summarize it for you very quickly.

If you read through the four Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke and John – which contain the eyewitness accounts of the life of Jesus in written form, you would see Him claiming ...^{iv}

- To be the Messiah; the King of the Jews.
- To be the divine Son of Man (prophesied by the Old Testament prophet Daniel) who would one day be established as ruler over the entire world
- To be the UNIQUE Son of God
- To be able to forgive sins
- To have been pre-existent (“Before Abraham was I AM.”)

Note that all of these statements were considered blasphemous – and punishable by death – by the Jewish religious leaders!

You would also hear Jesus claiming ...

- To be “owner” of the angels
- To have the right to make eternally binding pronouncements on His OWN authority
- To be the authoritative interpreter of the OT
- To be able to abolish the OT scriptures if He chose to do so (which He did not)
- To be “God” fulfilling the OT messianic prophecies
- To be the factor upon which the eternal destinies of humans depend

And you would see Jesus claiming ...

- To be worthy of higher loyalty and commitment than one’s own family (a position only God should have)
- To have EXCLUSIVE knowledge of the Father, and the SOLE “dispenser” of that knowledge
- To have the ability to one day be omnipresent (“wherever two or more are gathered in my name”)
- To be of equal status with the Father and the Spirit
- To be able to grant authority over demonic spirits
- To be able to grant authority IN THE SAME WAY the FATHER does
- To have special knowledge of heavenly events
- To have ALL authority in HEAVEN and EARTH
- To have authority over the Holy Spirit (“When I leave you, *I will send* the Comforter”).

All of these claims – and there are others such as Jesus saying ...

- “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35)
- “I am the way the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)
- “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12)
- “I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies; and whoever lives and believes in me will never die.” (John 11:25-26)

- “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit for apart from me you can do nothing.” (John 15:5)

All of these claims – and their outrageous and extraordinary nature – once led the famous Christian apologist C.S. Lewis to observe that there were only three reasonable options for those who were trying to determine who Jesus really was.

- He was either a lunatic – so out of touch with reality that he was completely self-deceived about his identity
- Or he was a liar – so self-absorbed that he attempted to deceive everyone else about his identity.
- Or He was exactly who he claimed to be: Lord – God in human flesh.

The Gospel writers consistently portray Jesus as one who understood Himself to be the divine Son of God ... an understanding which eventually gave rise to the creeds and liturgies of the early Church.^v

We’ve already heard part of one of them in the song Bethany sang – the Apostles Creed – which deals with several points of doctrine foundational to classic Christianity; all of which depend on Jesus of Nazareth. But what is probably the most amazing claim of the first disciples concerning Jesus is found in a letter that the Apostle Paul wrote to the Colossian Christians.

*Christ is the visible image of the invisible God.
He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation,
For through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth.
He made the things we can see and the things we can’t see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and
authorities in the unseen world.
Everything was created through him and for him.
He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together.*

*Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body.
He is the first of all who rise from the dead.
So he is first in everything.*

*For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to
himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ’s blood on the cross.
Colossians 1:15-20 (NLT)*

And what’s even more interesting about this particular passage is that the literary form in which it appears in the ancient Greek manuscripts is *poetry*, leading scholars to conclude that it was quite likely *a song used in worship by the first Christians*.

If you were here at the beginning of the service you heard our band lead us in something very similar:

Atoning sacrifice
Keeper of this life
Hallelujah You [Jesus] are Savior
Beginning and the end
Forgiver of my sin
By Your mercy You have saved us.^{vi}

It's pretty impressive when you think about it. Christians have been singing these kinds of songs about Jesus – and making these kinds of claims about Him – for almost 2,000 years ... while, at the same time, Muslims and Buddhists have done nothing of the sort for their leaders – and for good reason. *Those leaders told their followers not to!*

The Prophet Muhammad specifically warned his followers “not to adulate him the way Jesus, son of Mary was praised.” And so, they don't worship him; they understand that he is only a man. However, according to Muslim belief, he is a man worthy of utmost respect and love. He is the man, it is claimed, who will stand before God on the day of Requital and beg God to have mercy on us^{vii} if we are worthy ...

... which is an interesting contrast to what the Apostles said about Jesus: He doesn't just *plead* with God on our behalf. He *actually takes the place of those who believe in Him*. On the cross He became their substitute and paid the penalty that they should pay.

(picture) By the way, the Prophet is buried in Medina, Saudi Arabia. His tomb is under what is called (appropriately) the Mosque of the Prophet Muhammad.

The Buddha (Siddhartha Gautama) also did not claim to be a god or even a prophet (like Muhammad). According to Buddhist teaching, he was just a human being who, through tremendous effort of heart and mind, transcended all limitations and affirmed the potential of every being to reach Buddhahood. Buddhists see him as an ideal human being, and a guide who can lead us all towards Enlightenment.

(picture) And although he was cremated, a tomb was created in his honor near the Hiranyavati River (where he achieved his “enlightenment”).

Anyway ... I think you get my point. There never has been anyone quite like Jesus of Nazareth. What He claimed for himself and what his followers later claimed for Him is unmatched in all of human history.

Why Believe the Claims?

Of course, that raises another question ... which is “why would any rational person believe those claims?” I mean, maybe Jesus was a liar who deceived the multitudes. Maybe Jesus was a lunatic. Those are not unfair speculations.

Turns out that the only reason for you and me to believe his claims is the same reason the first Christians came to believe them – which did not happen immediately. At the time when Jesus was wandering around the Palestinian countryside making those claims, *there was quite a bit of doubt* among his followers – even as they heard Him speak and saw Him do the miraculous.

What finally convinced them in the end was this:

<Picture of empty tomb>

That's the tomb where the body of Jesus is *not* buried. After His body had been put there Friday evening following his crucifixion ... and after it had been sealed off with a massive boulder ... it was discovered to be empty on Sunday morning.

Actually, what *really* convinced Jesus' followers – more than just the empty tomb – was that they saw Him. They

touched Him. They talked with Him. They ate with him. And not just for a few brief moments. For well over a month, Jesus stayed with them before returning to the Father. And after He left, they could not stop talking about what they had experienced ... to everyone ... everywhere.

And *this* – not The Golden Rule, or the commandment to love, or the doctrine of the Trinity or the Second Coming or any other doctrine – became *the central proclamation* of the Apostles that led to the birth of the very first church in Jerusalem. *This* was at the heart of their preaching as they went out from Jerusalem to the non-Jewish world and established churches all over the Roman Empire.

“Jesus was killed on a cross and God raised Him from the dead. And we have seen him.”

“Furthermore,” they said (and this gets to the point I’m making), “this event – the resurrection of Jesus – is the vindication of all His claims and the substantiation of ours.”

As the Apostle Paul put it in his preaching to the Greeks at Athens:

“God has set a day for judging the world with justice by the man He has appointed, and He proved to everyone who this is by raising him from the dead.”
Acts 17:31 (NLT)

In other words, “Jesus of Nazareth was and is God. And the proof of that is the resurrection.”

Now, at this point, some of you are thinking, “Oh, my gosh. Poor preacher. I don’t know if he realizes it but he’s backed himself into a pretty tough corner. He’s saying that Jesus was unique among all religious leaders because of the extraordinary claims He made ... and that we can believe those claims because of an event in history that’s far *beyond extraordinary*. It’s bizarre. It’s unimaginable. It’s unheard of.”

I do realize that. Everything about Christianity not only rests, fundamentally, on the person of Jesus of Nazareth. It also rests on the reality *of the resurrection of Jesus*. If Jesus wasn’t really raised from the dead, all of this is just a waste of time. We who are Christians might as well become Muslims or Buddhists or Hindus or even atheists. (And, by the way, that thought isn’t original with me. Paul said the same thing to the Christians at Corinth).

On the other hand, if it is true ... then the converse also holds: Muslims and Buddhists and Hindus and even atheists ought to reexamine and reconsider what they believe and who they follow.

So, why would anyone believe that Jesus really did rise from the dead? Well, there’s a lot that could be said – far more, actually, than we have time for this morning. But let me very quickly give you a few reasons (beyond the eyewitness reports and the empty tomb which, by themselves, are quite substantial).

1. In the biblical accounts, the first eyewitnesses are women – not men. In that day, the testimony of women was not considered valid. So, if you’re making up a story, that’s not the way you would tell it.
2. A resurrection is the best explanation of the transformation of the disciples from cowards to missionaries. After the crucifixion they went and hid in fear for their lives. Six weeks later they began a movement – publicly – that immediately gained thousands of followers.

3. Other Messianic movements of that era died out when the leader died, but Christianity did not. Jesus was not the first to claim to be Israel's Messiah and to start a movement. But his movement did not die. And the reason was ... he wasn't dead.
4. Finally, not long after the church was established, Jesus' followers suffered rejection, torture and death for this claim, yet that did not stop them. If they had been making up a story, they would have quickly recanted to save their necks.

If you'd like to know more about this, check out the media section on our website this week and download the transcript of this message where I will include links to some outstanding sources on the matter.^{viii}

The bottom line (for me, at least) is that there's no better explanation of all the data we have available than the explanation that Jesus of Nazareth ...

- Was executed by crucifixion on Friday
- Physically rose from the dead on Sunday morning
- Then spent "many days" (as Paul put it) with his disciples preparing them to spread the good news of God's love and grace.
- And then he "crossed over" from this physical realm to the spiritual realm where He is at the right hand of the Father ...
- Until He returns to finish what He started, by setting the world right.

Making a Response

Of course, as wonderful as that sounds, in about 10 minutes all of us are going to walk out those doors into real life where the question will become "what does all this have to do with anything?"

- How does it matter when I go to school or work tomorrow?
- What does it mean for my marriage?
- How does it help me in raising my kids?
- Or dealing with the loss of someone or something I care about?

Well, if Jesus really did rise from the dead that means that He really was – and still is, actually – God in human flesh. And that means that everything that was recorded of what He said and did is of utmost importance to our lives. Not only did Jesus come to save us, He came to teach us how to live and to show us what God is really like so that we could relate to Him.

And we *can* relate to Him as one person relates to another through the Holy Spirit. If what Jesus claimed is true, He can be with us now, guiding us and giving us strength and encouragement.

So, what are we to do?

Well, since God has seen fit for whatever reason to allow you to discover this truth about Jesus, I think there are at least

three ways to respond.

1. Learn more about Jesus – what He said and what He did.

And over the next four weeks, that's what we're going to do as a church. And we're going to go at it from two directions.

- First of all, this series is going to continue for four more weeks. And each week we're going to learn about something Jesus said or did that was totally outrageous and turned the traditional understanding of God on its head.
- Secondly, I'm inviting you this morning to join me in a 24-day Bible reading challenge centered on the story of Jesus. It will cost you at most 10 minutes a day, six days a week for four weeks.

And to make it as easy as possible, I want to show you a neat little tool that will be very helpful. Let's watch.

Video Clip – THIS IS THE BIBLE (.5 min)

(Begin) Announcer: "This is the Bible."

(End) Announcer: "Download it for free at [Bible.com/app](https://www.bible.com/app)."

<BEGIN SLIDE SET 2>

You can get it at Bible.com ... or you can get it at the Google Play store if you're an Android user or I-tunes if you're an I-Phone user. You can also access it on your personal computer at Bible.com.

When you get connected and signed up look for a plan called "The Jesus Film 24-day Challenge." It has the scriptures to read for each day plus video clips from the Jesus film (which is pretty cool). And I can't believe I'm going to say this, but if you want to "friend me" on that app, we can keep track of each other's progress.

And don't worry if all that went by too fast, because I'll be posting all of that information later today on our Facebook page and also on my blog at the NHCC website.

So, first thing (if Jesus might really be who He claimed to be), make a commitment to learn more about Him.

2. Secondly, take seriously what you do know of Jesus.

You may not know a lot at this point and that's OK. But what you do know, take seriously. Integrate it into your life as much as possible.

When I was watching that video about the Iraqi Christians, I was struck at how seriously even the young people there take Him. 15 year old kids saying, "We love Jesus. And we follow Him."

And I wondered about myself and my commitment. And quite frankly, I wondered about a lot of you. How many of us who claim to be Christians are totally shaped and molded by the agenda of this world ... how many of us are guided and even *driven* by the philosophies of this world (conservative, liberal) ... without even stopping to consider what Jesus said.

Let me give you an example (which is guaranteed to offend pretty much everyone here). When I watch Fox News and listen to those pundits, many times I think, “do you all who claim to be so *moral* have any idea what Jesus said about *compassion*? He said a lot!”

And then when I flip the channel to CNN and listen to them, I think, “do you all who claim to be so *compassionate* have any idea what Jesus said about *morality*? He said a lot!”

And then I wonder: how much of what we think comes from *them* instead of from *Him*? And if you’re not a Christian, I’m not talking to you here. You can be influenced by whoever you like. But if you’re a Christian what matters most is Jesus. And quite frankly, the reason this country is so messed up these days in terms of both compassion and morality is because Christians do not take Jesus seriously (if they even know what He said).

Everyone offended yet? Good. I’m offended, too, so don’t take it personally.

Ok, so ... learn more about Jesus ... then take Him and what you do know about him seriously ... then, finally ...

3. Give your worship to Jesus (as believers through the centuries have done).

There’s something that happens inside when those of us who believe lift our voices and exalt Jesus in song. It’s not natural to do that. It’s not always comfortable to do that. It requires us to humble ourselves ... which is what makes it worship.

And this morning as we close, the band is going to do a song of worship that exalts Jesus and expresses thankfulness and submission to him. They’re going to start it out for us and then they’re going to invite us to stand and join in.

And if you’re a Christian, I strongly encourage you to whole heartedly engage. If you’re not a Christian – or you’re not sure, please don’t feel pressured by this. It’s totally fine if you want to stand and listen. No one is going to judge you or think less of you. I just wanted us to have an opportunity to respond to the One who proved Himself to be God by rising from the dead on that first Easter Sunday.

So, here we go.

Feature – The Stand

CLOSING COMMENTS

1. There is no one more important to your life and mine than Jesus of Nazareth. So I hope you’ll be here in the next few weeks as we learn more about Him and how it matters in “real life.”
2. Offering @door
3. Greet someone else

Endnotes

ⁱ <http://jonathanmerritt.religionnews.com/2015/01/07/persecution-christians-reached-historic-levels-2014-will-2015-worse/>

ⁱⁱ <http://y-jesus.com/is-there-any-evidence-from-secular-sources-that-jesus-even-existed/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://coldcasechristianity.com/2014/is-there-any-evidence-for-jesus-outside-the-bible/>

^{iv} Note that this list is taken and modified from <http://christianthinktank.com/trin03b.html>

^v ibid

^{vi} Lyrics from Laura Story's What a Savior

^{vii} See <http://www.islamreligion.com/articles/2626/>

^{viii} See http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Jesus_Resurrection.htm and http://ntwrightpage.com/Wright_Historical_Problem.htm.