

In recent weeks we have talked about religious beliefs of American's reflected in a study by George Barna for Arizona Christian University. Last month a study done by Lifeway Research for Ligonier Ministries found many of the same results Barna did. It also revealed some additional information about what American's believe about Jesus.

Now, what American's think about topics like abortion or same sex marriage is interesting, but as Christians the question that should concern us most is "What do people think about Jesus?" Lifeway asks a couple of questions that reveal contemporary attitudes. First they asked people whether they agreed or disagreed with this statement. *Jesus Christ was a great teacher, but not God.* 28% of respondents, said they agreed strongly with the statement, and 23% agreed somewhat. That means 51% affirm that Jesus was not God. On the other hand 27% strongly disagreed with the statement, and 10% disagreed somewhat. That left 12% saying they were not sure. The bottom line is that most American's apparently do not believe Jesus was or is God. If the survey accurately reflects reality, it means that for the first time in history, most American's reject the deity of Jesus Christ.

What is perhaps even more surprising is that many folks who attend Evangelical churches like ours also opt for Jesus being a great teacher, but not God. 32% of Evangelicals agreed with the statement. Now, that is better than Roman Catholics and mainly Protestants, where 57% said Jesus was a great teacher, but not God. I hope you all realize there is something wrong here. The Nicene Creed, which has been a standard of Christian belief for about 1700 years, says "*We believe in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father before all worlds, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father; By whom all things were made [both in heaven and on earth].*" In other words, Christians have always believed, at least until recent years, that Jesus was much more than a good teacher.

The foundation of that belief is what the New Testament teaches. **John 1:1** says **In the beginning was the Word and the Word was**

with God and the Word was God. As we continue in that chapter, it becomes clear that the Word, is Jesus. **John 1:14 – The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only son from the Father, full of grace and truth.** The Apostle Paul sums up Jesus' identity this way **Philippians 2:8 – Christ Jesus, who being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to His own advantage.** And then we have Jesus description of himself in **Revelation 1:17b, 18 – I am the First and the Last,**

and the Living One. I was dead, but look—I am alive forever and ever, and I hold the keys of death and Hades.

Friends, those verses make it very clear that Jesus is much more than just a great teacher. He is God the Son, who when here on earth was both fully human and fully God.

Now, I am puzzled that so many think Jesus was a great teacher, but not God, because that is an idea completely refuted by C.S. Lewis almost 75 years ago. In *Mere Christianity* Lewis wrote, "**I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic – on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg – or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.**"

That is pretty clear. Of one thing we can be certain. Jesus was not merely a great teacher. Yet, 32% of folks in Evangelical churches agree with the statement that Jesus was "A great teacher, but not God." Now, I am not pretending C.S. Lewis was writing inspired scripture, but I would suggest

every pastor, in every Evangelical church should make sure the people in their congregation know that Jesus was not a merely a great teacher, but was and is truly God. I think pastors who have never quoted what C.S. Lewis said have failed their congregations.

A second question the Lifeway folks asked also revealed some confusion of beliefs. Do you agree with this statement? Jesus was the first and greatest being created by God. 56% of the folks who attended Evangelical churches said they agreed with that statement. 44% strongly, 12% somewhat, 33% disagreed, which leaves 11% unsure. That really is not much difference than the general public, which had 55% agreeing and 30% disagreeing. Now, I really should have done a survey of our congregation. I am confident you guys would have done much better than the folks who were responding in this study. Most of you would strongly disagree with that statement. Why? Because you know “Jesus was not the first and greatest being created by God.” Rather, He is the *Eternal* Son of God. There was never a time when He did not exist. He was not created by God, because He is God. This idea that Jesus was the first and greatest created being originated with a fellow name Arius, a church leader way back in the 4th Century who believed it is dishonoring to God the Father to claim Jesus the Son is his equal. Fortunately, a fellow named Athanasius reminded the church that in the New Testament, the Apostles and Jesus himself spoke of the essential equality of the Father and Son, and that nothing brings more joy to the Father than the eternal love and fellowship he experiences with the other members of the eternal trinity, the Son and the Spirit.

Now, I understand that many of the 56% of folks from Evangelical churches who say they agree that Jesus was “The first and greatest being created by God” probably did so because it *sounds* honoring to Jesus. But they should recognize that this is the Jehovah Witnesses understanding of who Jesus is...He is not quite God. They do not believe Jesus is worthy of worship, because only God should be worshiped. They will even quote Jesus, **Matthew 4:10 – You must worship the Lord your God and serve only him.** This is the primary reason why Jehovah Witnesses are considered a cult, because they deny the Deity, the “Godness” of Jesus. Theologians have long pointed out how

erroneous Jehovah Witnesses teaching is, but maybe half of Evangelical Christians say they agree with the Jehovah Witnesses view of who Jesus is. That is just....wrong!

Ok, so that is some of the current thinking about Jesus in our culture. Let's focus now on a couple of important implications.

#1 We as Christians need to make sure we have a clear understanding of Jesus, of who He is and what He has done for us. Churches, pastors, need to make sure their people have a clear understanding. R.C. Sproul once observed, “Everyone is a Theologian. Some people just are not very good ones.” He is right. We all have thoughts about God, and about Jesus. The question is whether our thinking is clear and accurate. Does it match and reflect reality? Now, most of us tend to be pragmatic people. We are more interested in the practical, than the theoretical. Many times I have heard this: “People in the church have plenty of head knowledge about Christianity. The focus needs to be on practicing our faith.” Now, to some extent, I agree. If what we believe about God, what we believe about Jesus, doesn't impact how we live, there is something wrong.

During my first year of seminary, back in 1981....Wow...I had a conversation with Tim, another student, who happened to be president of the Seminary Student Council. He was an advocate of a more *practical* approach to ministry. He said, “ I believe Jesus was God, but I do not think that is *an important belief*. If like Arius and the Jehovah Witnesses, I thought Jesus was created by the Father, but not God, it really would not effect my ministry. I could still focus on helping people in need, even if Jesus was not God.” Now, friends, helping people in need is a big part of being a Christian, of following Jesus. But *it is not the only thing*. Confessing Jesus as Lord, honor and worship Him as the Eternal Son of God, that is a big part being a Christian too. And the Gospel, the message of the cross, is certainly a different message if Jesus is not truly God. Jesus was able to offer a sacrifice sufficient to save not just one other person, but all who trust in Him, *because* He was God incarnation, God in human flesh. Folks, I can tell you I would do ministry much differently if I believed Jesus was anyone other than the Eternal Son of god.

Some folks, who have been drinking from the fountain of Post-Modernism, concede that beliefs are important, but only because they bind a community together. They might say something like this: "As Christians, we believe Jesus rose from the dead and that He is the Son of God. However, whether these things are true, is not important. What matters is that these common beliefs give us a sense of connection with other Christians." Now, if that sounds kind of goofy to you, congratulations! It is goofy. Why? Because unlike other religions Christianity is built on events that actually happened. Anyone who lived in Jerusalem in the spring of 33 A.D. Could have seen Jesus being executed on the cross outside of the city. 48 hours later, anyone who would have gone to the tomb where Jesus' dead body had been put, would have found it empty. He was not there, because He had risen from the dead. That is not just my belief or opinion, it is a historical fact. And whether or not this resurrection actually happened, has huge practical implications. The Apostle Paul says **1 Corinthians 15: 14, 17-18 – And if Christ has not been raised, then all our preaching is useless, and your faith is useless. ¹⁷ And if Christ has not been raised, then your faith is useless and you are still guilty of your sins. ¹⁸ In that case, all who have died believing in Christ are lost!**

As C.S. Lewis pointed out so eloquently, if Jesus is in reality *not* the Eternal Son of God as He claims to be, then it makes n sense to even try to follow Jesus' teachings, much less trust Him as Savior and Lord. If Jesus was not God incarnated as He claimed, He was either a lunatic who belongs in a Psych ward, or a liar trying to deceive and manipulate people. Now, some insist there is a fourth option, that Jesus is a legend, and we have no way of knowing what he actually said or did. Thus, we do not know whether He claimed to be God or not. However, there is plenty of evidence that we do have a reliable record of Jesus' teaching and ministry, so I am confident that Jesus did indeed claim to be the Son of God. So now it is up to us to decide: Was he telling the truth?

Let me just say, if you are listening to me this morning, and for whatever reason, you are not sure about Jesus. You are not sure He is really God. You are not sure you can trust Him as your Savior. And you are not sure whether you can trust Him enough to follow His path of how to live. Friends,

if your not sure about Jesus, do not put those questions on the back burner. What you decide about Jesus Christ is the most important decision you will ever make. It makes the choice of who you are going to vote for in three weeks like choosing between Pepsi or Coke. Yes, I know I am going to choose Coke. I can tell you why I will make that choice, but in the big picture it is not that significant of a decision. My point is that even though who you choose to vote for in the president election this year is important, it totally pales compared to the decision you make about Jesus Christ. If you have questions about that please give me a call.

#2 Lesson we need to beware of "Christless Christianity." That is the title of a very good book that Dr. Michael Horton wrote a few years ago. When I read that 32% of people who go to Evangelical Churches think Jesus was merely a great teacher, that 58% of Evangelicals agree with that statement that he is the first and greatest being created by God, the thought comes to mind is this: "These folks are going to churches where they do not talk about Jesus enough." Now, some of you are thinking "Pastor Dan, what are you saying? Every Evangelical church talks about Jesus." Well, I am sure His name is mentioned, but based on what Dr. Horton writes, and what I observe talking to other pastors and people is that Jesus is sometimes put on the back shelf. The problem includes pastors who preach sermons on wide variety of things other than Jesus. And includes ordinary Christians in who in various ways make something other than Jesus the focus of their Christian lives. It is maybe easiest to illustrate with sermons. Some pastors focus on being "Practical" and on Sunday mornings talking about "How to have a better marriage; How to manage your finances; How to overcome anxiety or maybe, "How to have your best life now." The focus is not on Jesus, but on, helping folks in the congregation reach their goals and get more out of life. Jesus may be mentioned as someone who will help you reach your goals, but the message is not about Jesus.

Other sermons focus on doing the right things and being a better person. Horton calls it "Moralism." This includes statements, like "The message from the feeding of the five thousand is that *we should be like the little boy and share our food with others.*" Or "*Like David, you need to have the courage to face*

the giants in your life.” Now, those statements are essentially true, but the real message from the feeding of the five thousand is about Jesus, about His amazing power and compassion. The real story of David and Goliath is how David as a small case messiah, defeats the giant and points us to Jesus, the true Messiah, who through His death on the cross and resurrection from the dead, has already defeated the devil, and who will one day return to destroy all the forces of evil. I find there are a lot of Evangelical pastors, good men, who do not correctly read and preach the Old Testament. I know because I used to be one of them. For years I failed to grasp what Luther was talking about when he said, “Christ is on every page of the Old Testament, in the New Testament we learn His name is Jesus.”

For years I didn't appreciate and fully recognize the story line that runs through the entire Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. It tells how the seed of the woman (Genesis 3:15) would ultimately crush the seed of the serpent, restore God's people to perfect fellowship with their creator, and bring us to a home even better than Eden. Oh there are many, many chapters in that story. But Jesus is always the hero. And whenever I am preaching from the Old Testament, I want to make sure that message is not lost, that we do not focus on trees so much that we lose sight of the forest.

Other pastors focus not on Jesus, but on improving society. And whether it is from the left or the right, whether the focus is on “Social Justice” or making Americans Christian again, *if the focus is not on Jesus, it is not a good thing.* Yes the Bible certainly has political implications. Yet, I suggest what our nation needs is not so much political reform as spiritual transformation. Then there are pastors, very well intentioned, who see the mediocrity in the lives of so many Christians and focus their sermons on how we should be more committed, and more zealous, *on what we need to do for Jesus.* Folks, that is not the Gospel, which is about what Jesus has done for us. And yes, we should do things for Jesus, but we should only do them because of who He is and what He has done, is doing and will do for us.

Friends, when I hear that many folks in Evangelical churches think Jesus was just a good teacher, or anything less than God in a human body, it tells me we need to focus a little more on the basics. One of the basics is Baptism, the

initiatory rite in the Christian church. Though one may have been a believer and part of God's family for sometime before being baptized, it is kind of a formal induction. So basic. This morning I want you to kind of renew your Baptismal vows. I am going to ask the questions I ask when someone is being baptized, and if you are in agreement, please respond by saying yes. And if you have not been baptized, please join in and affirm your faith. So dear friends, do you believe Jesus Christ is the Eternal Son of God who died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead to guarantee your salvation. (Yes, I do) and is it your testimony that by grace through faith you have received Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord. (Yes, it is) and was your Baptism an expression of your desire to, by God's grace, follow Jesus the rest of your days. (Yes, it was)

Friends, just saying those words doesn't mean a whole lot. But if you mean those words, they are just about the most important words you will ever speak.