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“I Am”

(John 8:58)

Was Jesus merely a good man and a great teacher? Was Jesus a social activist, feeding the hungry, healing the sick, and advocating for the poor? Was Jesus a great example of love and sacrifice for us to follow? The answer to these queries are vitally important as we seek to answer the greatest question of all – the question that Christ Himself asked – “Who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15) John wrote his gospel to help us understand and answer that question. In the “I am” statements recorded by John, be get a clear answer as to Who Jesus is and all that He has done for us.

One of the best presentations of the truth of the gospel and of the person and work of Christ is found in the Gospel of John. John’s gospel was written **“That you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name”**. (John 20:31). John recorded the miracles (signs) Jesus performed and the teaching Jesus proclaimed so that His readers might place their faith in Christ. One the aspects of Jesus’ teaching unique to John’s gospel are the “I am” statements of Christ. Each of these statements presents a tremendous description of the person of Christ and the work He accomplished on our behalf. None of these statements more clearly presented His claim to be God than when He proclaimed to the crowds in 8:58, “I am”!

58 Jesus said to them, “Most assuredly, I say to you, before Abraham was, I AM.”

As we consider this wonderful claim of Christ, we can clearly answer Jesus’ own question, “Who do you say that I am?”

Context of Jesus’ Claim: A growing Conflict

As we read through the Gospel of John, we find a conflict between Jesus and the Pharisees that begins in chapter five, escalates throughout His public ministry in chapters 5-16, and culminates in His crucifixion in chapter 18. In chapter 8 we find the Pharisees questioning Jesus and challenging His claims. Notice their challenges and questions that clearly reveal their animosity and unbelief: **“You bear witness of yourself; your witness is**

not true” (vs. 13); **“Who are you?”** (vs. 25); **“Do we not say rightly that You are a Samaritan and have a demon?”** (vs. 48); **“Are You greater than our father Abraham, who is dead? And the prophets are dead. Who do You make Yourself out to be?”** (vs. 53). It is in response to this last question that Jesus gives His startling reply that **“Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad”**. (vs. 56) Refusing to even consider that Jesus was indeed God in the flesh, the Pharisees retorted, **“You are not yet fifty years old, and have you seen Abraham?”** Jesus responds with the statement that the Pharisees clearly understand to be a claim of deity and equality with God.

Meaning of Jesus’ Claim

Jesus’ words **“before Abraham was, I AM”** are climactic. That is, before Abraham came into existence, Jesus was already existing, or living. There is an obvious contrast in the tenses of the verbs used to refer to Abraham and to Christ. The verb “was” meaning “to come to be” or “to enter into existence” points to the fact that Abraham had his beginning at some point in time. In contrast, the present tense “I AM” references Christ’s eternal existence. Abraham lived as long as 2000 years before Christ. For Jesus to claim that before Abraham was ever born He already existed was an astounding statement. He clearly spoke of His eternal existence as God.

This statement by Jesus refers all the way back to God's revelation of Himself to Moses at the burning bush found in Exodus 3. Here God calls Moses to go and lead the people of Israel out of Egypt. In questioning God, Moses asks, "...**When I come to the children of Israel and say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you,' and they say to me, 'What is His name?' what shall I say to them?**" God's response is profound: "**And God said to Moses, 'I AM WHO I AM.'**" And He said, "**Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'**" Again, a present tense verb is used indicating God's eternal existence. It is significant that the same terms are used by Christ in John chapter 8.

This claim by Jesus to be the eternally existing God carries throughout this chapter. In 8:24 he boldly declares, "**If you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins.**" In 8:28, referring to His crucifixion He continues, "**When you lift up the Son of Man, then you will know that I am *He*...**" We must note in both these statements the "*He*" is in italics in our English translations meaning that it is not found in the original text. These statements, just as in 8:58 can both be read, "**I AM**".

Response to Jesus' Claim

Consider the different responses of those who saw Christ's miracles and heard his message.

Belief

"Believing" is a key theme that runs throughout John's gospel. He uses some form of the word 98 times. It is the stated purpose of his writing. Remember Jesus made a powerful statement in 8:24; "**If you do not believe that I am *He*, you will die in your sins**". Verse 30 reveals that "**As *He* (Jesus) spoke these words, many believed in Him**". There were those that responded in faith to Jesus' miracles and His message.

Unbelief

There were many more, however who rejected Christ and His message. Some critics who deny Jesus' miracles or His deity may state that Jesus never claimed to be God. However, the Pharisees' strong reaction indicates that they clearly understood Jesus was asserting His deity and His equality with God. They considered Him to be guilty of blasphemy and so without the benefit of a trial they "**took up stones to throw at Him**". (vs.

59) Since it was not time for Jesus to be killed and He was to go to the cross to suffer and die in our place, "**He hid Himself and went out of the temple, going through the midst of them...**" The violent response of the Pharisees indicated the depth of their unbelief and their rejection of Christ. As we consider the response of those who heard Jesus' message in that day, we realize that people today have the same responses, belief or unbelief!

Conclusion

We have the same responsibility to respond to the message of the gospel as did the people in Jesus day! Have you indeed believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God (John 20:31) and **that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures...?** (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)

It is significant to recognize that many witnessed Jesus' signs. Relatively few chose to believe in Him and His message. Most chose to reject Him and His teaching despite the miracles He performed. They saw His signs and they heard His words, but they refused to believe in Him!

This has great implication for how we as believers seek to present the gospel of Christ to those around us. Much that is done today in the name of evangelism seems to be based on the idea that it is our responsibility to convince or cause folks to accept the gospel and place their faith in Christ. On the contrary, Christ Himself performed great miracles and proclaimed a clear message, yet many refused to believe in Him. It is our responsibility to proclaim the gospel and present the Word of God. We must depend upon Him to work in the hearts of people to put their faith in Him!

Let us once again be overwhelmed with the truth that eternal God, in the person of Jesus Christ, became man so that He might live, suffer, die, and rise again that we might have our sins forgiven. Let that drive us to love Him, serve Him, and share Him with others.

BIBLE STUDIES

Thursdays,

8:00 AM Governor's Conference Room (Sec. of State's Ofc)

12:00 Noon Treasurer's Conference Room (EB54,

Basement of East Wing)