

JESUS AND THE PEOPLE OF HIS GENERATION

Jesus Was the Message

CONTEMPORARY MAN IS remarkably blind, irrational, and highly susceptible to the conditioning of his culture. The institutions of his society are deliberately influencing him to conclude that theistic religious belief is superstition; that liberation and integrity lie in acknowledging the relative nature of truth; that it is somehow noble to live with the ensuing struggle against futility.

How do we as Christians, carrying the truth of the gospel in our hearts, respond to this adverse indoctrination? It is so easy to become intimidated, to feel incompetent in the face of the disparity between the Christian and secular positions. Who, we ask, is competent to mount a counterattack? There may be an unusual person here and there who is equal to the challenge, but we are quite sure that it is not us.

So the temptation to give up, to direct our efforts toward those with whom we feel more comfortable, is almost overwhelming. But we are mistaken. It is not that difficult. It is within the capacity of the average Christian to be effective among the people of this generation. Because we are sent to *every* creature, we can hardly conclude that the mainstream of our society is out of reach!

THERE IS ONLY ONE ISSUE

The Apostle John began his Gospel by describing Jesus as the light of the world. The theme of light and darkness runs throughout the entire book. Such a theme is worthy of our scrutiny because it is the biblical response to

the problems of man we have just addressed.

Jesus stated clearly that He is the light that man needs: "I have come into the world as a light, so that no one who believes in me should stay in darkness" (John 12:46).

Now this is good news for darkened minds! And this is *our* message, too. It is the only message we have, because He is the only true light. Our singular objective must be to communicate Jesus Christ.

You may feel that this is a lot easier said than done. Did we not just recognize that those we seek to win don't even care if Jesus existed or if He was who He claimed to be? Since they don't care, how can we expect a response when we approach them with the news that Jesus is the light of the world?

But the fact remains, He *is* the light; there isn't any other. If any ray of hope is to penetrate the thinking of this generation, it is going to be this ray. Impossible? Jesus faced a similar situation. Let's take a close look at the basis of Jesus' communication with the people of His generation.

JESUS, THE UNIVERSAL TRUTH

The people in Jesus' life can be divided into four categories: the multitudes, His enemies, His disciples, and the Twelve. There is one theme that remains constant in His communication with each of these four groups. Because of this consistency and because of the nature of this theme, we can conclude that we are dealing with a universal truth. It is timeless in its significance and in its effectiveness.

This universal truth, when given its proper prominence and offered without adulteration, penetrates to the core, for it appeals to the essential and unchanging nature of man. As it unfolds, even those we regard as the least likely often begin to respond to God's call to enter His Kingdom.

Jesus and His opponents. What was the root issue that put Jesus' adversaries into conflict with Him? Jesus identified it in John 8:23-25: "You are from below; I am from above. You are of this world; I am not of this world. . . . If you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins."

"Who are you?" they asked. That is the question! The essential issue of every relationship in Jesus' life dealt with the question of His identity. It is still the foremost question. *Who is Jesus?*

When a mortal man claims he is deity, honest intellectual questions are certainly in order! Jesus clearly claimed to be God, but the fascinating thing about the dialogues between Jesus and His accusers was that the debate never centered on the intellectual tenability of that claim. Almost

without exception, the thrust of the dialogue was a focus on the overly subjective nature of their resistance against Him.

Obstacles to faith—Jesus encountered many people who were unwilling to follow Him because of certain areas of resistance in their lives. Those who try to evangelize others still encounter these obstacles to faith.

1. **Public opinion**—On one occasion, Jesus asked the Jews who opposed Him, "How can you believe if you accept praise from one another?" (John 5:44). He was attempting to show them that it was their *concern for their own social status* that was barring the way.

2. **Misinformation**—On another occasion a discussion broke out among the people surrounding Jesus over this issue of His identity (John 7:40-42). "Some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet.' Others said, 'He is the Christ.' Still others asked, 'How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem . . .?'"

In this case the obstacle was *misinformation*. The things people thought they knew—casually formed, preconceived notions—got in the way of true understanding.

3. **Self-sufficiency**—Later, Jesus was conversing with a man He had just healed who had been blind from birth (John 9:35-41). The subject was the same! "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" Jesus asked.

"Who is he, sir?" asked the blind man. Jesus said, "He is the one speaking with you." Then the man acknowledged his faith in Jesus.

With that, Jesus addressed the crowd: "For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind." The Pharisees in the crowd got the point and asked, "What? Are we blind too?" Jesus replied that they were, in fact, blind. Because they insisted that they could see, they were blind to their own spiritual blindness.

In this situation the obstacle was *man's excessive faith in himself*. These presumptuous Pharisees felt they had it within themselves to work their way spiritually through life on their own.

Again, the barrier was not due to lack of knowledge; it was due to an excess of subjectivity.

4. **Concern for position**—Irrationality growing out of a subjectivity apparently knows no limits. The case of Lazarus demonstrates this fact clearly (John 11:1-12:11). As in almost every other situation, Jesus used a crisis to focus on the critical issue of His identity.

Imagine the scene: Lazarus is dead. We spent all night at the wake. Then Jesus appears. By now He is exceedingly famous for His sayings and His miracles. But here is a miracle unlike any other—He raises Lazarus from the dead! How do you react to this? Did the observers conclude that Jesus is God as He claimed?

Amazingly, the reaction of some is, "If we let him go on like this, everyone will believe in him." So what's wrong with that? "Then the Romans will come and take away both our place and our nation" (11:48).

Position, prestige, the status quo—all take priority over truth in the value system of most people.

So how did those who opposed Jesus handle truth? They tried to eliminate it! The Sanhedrin passed the death sentence on Jesus and, furthermore, "the chief priests made plans to kill Lazarus as well" (12:10). Irrational men! If they can't refute the evidence, they destroy it!

5. *Rebellion*—Finally, it was this issue of Jesus' identity that cost Him His life (Matthew 26:63-68). At His trial, "The high priest said to him, 'I charge you under oath by the living God: Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.' Yes, it is as you say," Jesus replied." With that they declared Him worthy of death.

There is a demanding logic that leads to this irrational rejection of Jesus' claim to deity: To acknowledge that Jesus is God is to acknowledge His authority, and to acknowledge His authority is to acknowledge His right to authority over me. *Rebellion* is the fundamental problem of mankind from the time of the Fall. To concede to His deity without submitting to His authority is to acknowledge that rebellion. This is a very difficult concession for any individual to make. In the final analysis, rebellion is always the real issue.

Jesus and the multitudes. On the surface, the response of the multitudes to Jesus was almost the opposite from that of His religious enemies. The multitudes liked Jesus. They followed Him everywhere He went. They were much like the religious people of our day. To them, it was important to have a faith. It gives structure to life, and, besides, children need to be raised with some solid moral principles. But often their true response was identical to the response of those who were openly opposed to Him.

Two things attracted the multitudes to Jesus: (1) They were amazed at His teaching, "because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law"; and (2) they were amazed at His power: "He even gives orders to evil spirits and they obey him" (Mark 1:22,27). It was exciting to be around Jesus! They enjoyed listening to and watching Him, and they anticipated benefiting from His powers.

Jesus' popularity grew to the extent that on certain occasions "so many gathered that there was no room left, not even outside the door. . . . A crowd gathered, so that he and his disciples were not even able to eat" (Mark 2:2, 3:20-21). Jesus' family became so concerned for Him that they felt compelled "to take charge of him." They thought He had gone out of His mind!

Jesus was famous. He by far eclipsed John the Baptist. Everyone was euphoric about Him—the *multitudes*, who enjoyed everything about Jesus, and the *twelve disciples*, who basked in the reflection of His popularity. But Jesus was not impressed. In fact, He eventually put an end to it all.

On one occasion, Jesus confronted those who were following Him with the fact that He was dissatisfied with their response to Him. He said, "You are looking for me . . . because you are the loaves and had your fill. Do not work for food that spoils, but for food that endures to eternal life." They asked, "What must we do to do the works God requires?" Jesus answered, "The work of God is this: to believe in the one he has sent" (John 6:26-29).

Again the issue was that of His identity. Jesus was essentially saying, "You are following Me for pragmatic reasons, but that is not good enough. If you are going to follow Me, it must be on My terms—and those terms are to accept Me as God!"

The people understood what He was saying, but they revealed their unbelief with their response, "What miraculous sign then will you give that we may see it and believe you? What will you do?" (6:30).

Unbelievable! They had seen Him cast out demons, heal the sick, and feed the multitudes. They had marveled at His teachings. They could accept Him as a great teacher, as a miracle worker, as a prophet, or as a political leader, but to accept Him as God was just asking too much!

Jesus, knowing this, sent them on their way with a few incisive, difficult statements about Himself: "I am the bread of life. . . . I have come down from heaven. . . . This bread is my flesh. . . . Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you" (John 6:35,38,51,53).

The multitude reacted immediately. The people grumbled among themselves. They argued, they complained, and they were offended. "From this time many of his disciples turned back and no longer followed him" (6:66).

At any given point in this discussion, Jesus could have eased up, but He knew what He was doing. He was deliberately dividing the people with this issue of His identity. In essence, He was saying, "Either believe that I am who I am, accepting all the implications, or go back to your homes! Stop deluding yourselves by following Me around!"

Why was it so hard for the people to accept those conditions? They seemed to be coming along so well! But it was here that they revealed how very similar they were to those who were Jesus' openly avowed enemies. Why is it so hard to acknowledge Jesus' identity? It is because we can't both be in control. There can only be one king! It is so hard to give up our ill-fitting sovereignty.

Jesus and His disciples. This same thread—Jesus' identity—runs through everything He taught His disciples. In fact, Jesus apparently reserved most of His teachings of any significance for those of His followers who committed themselves to the truth of His identity. He spoke in parables and in enigmatic terms to the multitudes. It is clear that they understood very little. Jesus said to His disciples, "The secret of the kingdom of God has been given to you. But to those on the outside everything is said in parables so that, 'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving'" (Mark 4:11-12).

What was happening here? Was Jesus deliberately withholding truth from hungry people? Not at all! The Bible goes on to explain, "With many similar parables Jesus spoke the word to them, *as much as they could understand*. He did not say anything to them [the multitudes] without using a parable. But when he was alone with his own disciples, he explained everything" (Mark 4:33-34, emphasis added).

Jesus taught the multitudes all He could, which wasn't much because they had rejected His divine identity, the very basis of truth. Until we embrace the foremost premise of Jesus' teachings—that He is God—none of the rest is going to make much sense.

Jesus broadened the disciples' understanding of the dimensions of His authority. His authority, too, is rooted in His identity—who He is. Jesus displayed His authority over human authorities (Mark 1:22), over Satan (Mark 1:27), over sin (Mark 2:9), over tradition (Mark 2:27-28), over creation (Mark 4:39), and even over life and death (John 10:18, 19:10-11). In short, His response to His disciples over that question "Who am I?" was essentially "I am authority over everything in heaven and on earth."

A true disciple understands the dimensions of Christ's authority and brings his life step by step under that authority. As he does this, something miraculous takes place. His bondage is replaced by freedom (John 8:31-32). He overcomes the world. This is a critical truth. Jesus says to everyone, "What is your problem? Whatever it is, give it to Me, because I have destroyed the power of that particular problem. I have authority over that one. Leave it with Me. I will resolve it and you can go free."

Making disciples is helping someone else experience and understand the dynamics of Christ's authority so that he, too, can go free. Here again, Jesus' identity is the determinative issue. For Jesus' opponents and for the multitudes who followed Him, the question of His identity determined life and death. For His disciples it determined freedom and bondage. But what about the twelve men who stayed close to Him for three years?

Jesus and the Twelve. In the training of the Twelve, Jesus carried the issue of His identity to its ultimate implications. That this issue was, in fact,

central to everything He did with the Twelve is demonstrated in His prayer to the Father in John 17.

He began this prayer by underscoring the centrality of His identity to His entire ministry. "Now this is eternal life: that they [all believers] may know you [the Father], the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent" (17:3).

Then He went on to intercede for the Twelve. "I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. . . . They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me" (17:6-8). The training of the Twelve consisted of bringing those men into a firsthand acquaintance with God and into a comprehension that Jesus and the Father are one and the same God! Jesus said, "If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him. . . . Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:7,9).

Jesus spent most of His short time of ministry communicating this single fact to His small handful of men: He and His Father are one. To grasp the implications of what this unity means is to understand the basis of all spiritual power (John 14:20). As Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing. . . . [But with me you] will do even greater things than [my miracles], because I am going to the Father" (John 15:5, 14:12).

If Jesus had not left behind Him men who were gripped by this understanding of His identity, there would have been no future for the Christian movement. Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. *Therefore* go and make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:18-19, emphasis added). A full comprehension and acceptance of Jesus' identity makes us full participants of His power. The Great Commission would have been a fool's errand with anything less.

The continuity of this theme of Jesus' identity as it runs through all His relationships demonstrates that it is an issue of ultimate importance! Every other theme is subordinate to this one. *He* is the gospel. *He* is our message. Everything else we Christians believe and hold dear is an outworking of this one truth. If we are to be effective among the people of this generation, our own understanding of Christ—the implications of His identity, His death and His resurrection—must be dynamic and growing.

FOUR

THE MESSAGE FOR OUR GENERATION

The Issue of His Identity

JESUS MUST BE the substance of our evangelism. Since He considered it vitally important to concentrate on the fact and implications of His Divine identity, we would be well advised to put forth the same emphasis. In this chapter we will look at some of the ways in which we unwittingly blur the focus on Christ.

THE GOSPEL OF POPULAR ISSUES

What is the gospel? This is a question theologians and Christian leaders love to ask. When they pose it, the implication is usually that no one within earshot has the faintest notion of the answer. I usually come away from such dialogues with feelings of frustration.

And yet I've observed something quite significant in these discussions. Almost always when this question of the gospel is posed, the questioner has an ulterior motive. He really wants to make us guess what *his* particular gospel happens to be. It is the gospel—plus his emphasis! For example, one of the big issues today is social justice. So the gospel according to one questioner might be a gospel of social justice. For another, it might be a gospel of prosperity. For another, it might be a gospel of civil rights.

The process is simple. We focus on an issue that so impresses us that it looms in our minds as *the* issue of utmost importance. Then we proceed to make that issue or truth an essential part of our message. When we do that, we create a partisan gospel. We use Jesus to support our private cause. He