

WHAT DID CHRIST CLAIM?

WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

Psalm 110:1-7, 31-32; Matthew 21:1-11

March 24, 2002

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Who is Jesus Christ? Is he real? Is he a figment of our imagination, a legend, fantasy? Is he savior of the world? Who is Jesus Christ? The question “Who is this man?” was the prime subject for conversation on the first Palm Sunday.

Lining the parade route that Sunday were the curious, the convinced and the concerned. The curious show up at events like that. They like to know what’s happening. They got an eyeful. They got to see Jesus. There were also the convinced who shouted hosanna, who spread their own coats as a red carpet for Jesus. The convinced don't just watch what is happening. They are part of what's happening. Nothing extraordinary happens without the convinced doing it and the curious watching it. There were also the concerned who looked on and rebuked the disciples. They were wary of what was happening, but at least they were there.

The curious, the convinced and the concerned were all there. The fearful, however, stayed away. They didn't make the parade. They didn't see bread multiplied or people healed. They stuck their heads in the sand and ignored what happened. Fear prevented them from seeing Christ. Fear prevents that today. Year after year in my ministry I have watched fear petrify people. I have seen it rob people of help and blessing

and prevent people from receiving healing and comfort. The fearful didn't line that parade route and they didn't ask any questions. How then could they know the truth?

As a teenager I was provoked to question. I visited my older cousin who attended a seminary where the faith received skepticism. He said. *"Jesus never claimed to be the Messiah. He never claimed to be Lord."* His challenge made me alert to not only what Christ claimed with his mouth, but what he affirmed with his actions. The primary question for the people on that first Palm Sunday and for the world today is *"Who does Jesus claim to be and who is he?"*

Several years ago my family attended weddings of relatives where large limousines were rented for the wedding parties. During the receptions, my kids piled in and rode around in the limousines. They enjoyed riding around like big shots. Imagine if there had been presidential seals, flags and motorcycle patrolmen in escort? All that would have suggested something untrue, that these kids were heads of state. They were important, but they were not heads of state. Although there were no limousines or motorcycles on Palm Sunday, the procession suggested a head of state was coming.

Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. (Zechariah 9:9)

Jesus knew the words of Zechariah. They were studied by rabbis and learned by children. Many on that road knew what was taking place. When Jesus mounted that colt, it was as if he entered a limousine complete with the insignia and flags. He was either pretending or he was revealing a truth.

It's obvious that the crowd understood the significance of the procession because they greeted Jesus as a king, and Jesus defended their actions. He claimed that their

praise and reception was appropriate, even ordained by God. How can one say that he didn't claim to be the Messiah?

Other actions of Jesus suggested that he saw himself as ruler. His listeners marveled at the authority with which he spoke and acted. Jesus cleansed the temple as if he had the right and authority. Jesus commanded nature and demons as if he had the right and authority. Jesus gave commandments to people as if he had the right and authority.

Whatever Jesus claimed verbally, his *actions* resoundingly presented himself as one especially anointed of God to lead the people. That is what Messiah or Christ means: anointed by God to lead.

Jesus not only acted as the Messiah, *he acknowledged* he was. He accepted the worship and adoration of others. When people sought to worship the disciples, they tore their robes and rebuked their devotees for their mistaken; but Jesus accepted the devotion of others without rebuke.

One year's salary (or a little more than \$62,000, which is the average household income in northwest Rochester) went into a bottle of perfume that was dumped on the feet of Jesus. When others protested, Jesus rebuked the protesters rather than the woman who did such a thing. When people prostrated themselves before Jesus, he never rebuked them. When Peter called him Messiah, Jesus quieted him, but never corrected him.

What kind of person allows such devotion and notions about himself to flourish? Either those notions must be true, or two other possibilities exist: he is deluded or deceitful. Josh McDowell looked at Christ's claims and concluded that either Jesus is a liar, a lunatic or Lord. He noted that Christ's claims are different from any other. Buddha

claimed to point the way to God. Mohammed claimed to know the truth about God, but Jesus' claims were entirely different.

Jesus not only *acted* as the Messiah, he not only *acknowledged* it in the devotion he accepted, but he also *asserted* it. Interrogated after his arrest, Jesus told the high priest that he is the Messiah that will sit at God's right hand (Matt. 26:63-66). He told others, "*I am the door through which the sheep find life*" (John 10:1-10). Jesus claimed, "*I am the light of the world*" (John 8:12). He said, "*I am the Bread of Life, the Bread from Heaven that gives life to the world*" (John 6:41-51). Jesus said, "*I am the resurrection and the life*" (John 11:25). Buddha didn't claim that. Mohammed didn't claim that. Jesus said, "*I am the way, the truth and the life*" (John 14:6). Others claimed to *know* the way, to *know* the truth, to *know* the life, but they never claimed to *be* the way, to *be* the truth, to *be* the life.

On one occasion, people picked up rocks to stone Jesus. Do you know what Jesus claimed that day? He said to a crowd of his countrymen,

"I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" (John 8:58-59)

Do you understand that claim? Jesus claimed to exist before their ancestor Abraham and before the covenant that began their nation. Indeed, he claimed to be the God who revealed himself to Moses as "***I AM!***" When God called to Moses out of the burning bush and commanded him to return to Egypt, Moses asked, "*Who shall I tell them is sending me? What is your name?"*

God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM. This is what you are to say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:14)

The people hearing Jesus calling himself ***I AM***, picked up stones to hurl at Jesus because in saying this, he claimed to be God!

Later, Jesus told his followers, *"All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore, go and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to obey everything I've commanded of you."* You cannot separate Jesus' teachings from his claims. You cannot say he was a good teacher and discount his claims as if they never occurred.

Suppose at college you had a great philosophy professor and everybody loved his teaching. Yet he claimed to be one with God. He commanded the devotion of his students and encouraged their worship of him. That is not a good teacher, is it? Jesus is either worthy of all your devotion and trust, or he is worthy of none of it. He is either deity or a deceiver. He's not something in between.

Unlike the followers of Mohammed and Buddha, the message of the early church was not about the teaching of their leader. It was about who Jesus was, is and will be. That was no accident. The message of Jesus was really about Jesus. His followers not only passed that message on, they also found that this man fulfilled prophecy with every turn. Some of the prophecies were so obscure that only after seeing Jesus and considering what Jesus did could they realize that the Old Testament words were prophetic.

The Bible is not about church, philosophy, morals or religious doctrines and practices. The Bible is about God and a man who claimed to be that God. He will either be your God or you will reject him. There is no in-between. You will join the parade of believers who trust in him, or in fear you will shrink back and stay at a distance. If you're curious or concerned, you'll at least watch the parade, but I hope you'll be convinced and join the parade. Jesus was meant for you and billions of others. Join his parade. Moreover, embrace him today as your king and savior.

