

# WHAT ABOUT THE BODY OF CHRIST?

## WILL THE REAL JESUS PLEASE STAND UP!

### PART V

We are still in Jerusalem at the end of the Feast of Tabernacles. It has been something of a "coming out" for Jesus in that He had allowed the people to speculate about Him as Messiah - with no disclaimer or refutation (7:25ff). To the contrary, He offered Himself to them as the water of life (7:37ff) and the light of the whole world (8:12ff). Those are bold claims. They are invitations to faith. They are also dangerous challenges to His enemies.

The **identity** of Jesus is everything for John - and for us. If He is who He claims to be, He is God in the flesh. We have a Savior. Our own identities have been defined, renewed, and reoriented. At least, the identity of every human being has the potential for radical alteration! But if and only if Jesus is who He claims to be.

Sometime after His arrival in Jerusalem around midweek of festival time, Jesus Himself had started all this. When some of the conjecture about Him began, John writes that Jesus "cried out" - He didn't hint or whisper or say to a select few - and declared Himself. His unflinching claim here becomes the background to everything we will hear from Him today.

Then Jesus cried out as He was teaching in the temple, "You know me, and you know where I am from. [This is Jesus' use of irony, in my opinion. I would favor a question mark rather than a period at the end of the sentence. He is saying: 'So you think you know me and where I'm from, do you?' RS.] I have not come on my own. But the one who sent me is true, and you do

not know Him. I know Him, because I am from Him and He sent me (7:28-29).

It's a good thing for Jesus (and us!) that He was secure in Himself, for the big question they have of Him is, "**Who are you?**" (8:25). Just look at the judgments some of them were passing on Him: He's suicidal (8:22), He's a Samaritan (8:48a), He's demon-possessed (8:48b, 52), and He deserves to die (8:59).

### Jesus' Self-Image

It isn't uncommon nowadays to hear people say it doesn't matter who Jesus thought He was or what claims He made. "The important thing is not what He was or what He wasn't - the important thing is what people believe Him to have been," says Jeremy Bowen in a BBC documentary on Jesus.

Bowen couldn't be more mistaken! If Jesus didn't claim deity for Himself and was not God in the flesh, Christians are idolaters and have made a mere human into the object of veneration. If Jesus isn't who He claimed to be, the judgment His enemies made to the effect that He was crazy is kind - for the other possibility would be that He deliberately and constantly lied about Himself. His **identity** is the centerpiece of the Christian faith - not the various churches that preserve His memory, formulate doctrines about Him, or offer our varieties of devotion.

Here is who Jesus said He was:

- \* the one from above (8:23, cf.42)
- \* the one on whom salvation depends (8:24)
- \* the one who speaks for the Father on high (8:28)
- \* the one who gives people true freedom (8:36)
- \* the one who is altogether free of sin (8:46)
- \* the one the Father glorifies (8:54)
- \* the one who knows God (8:55a)
- \* the one who keeps God's word (8:55b)
- \* the one whose career Abraham foresaw (8:56)
- \* the one who pre-existed Abraham (8:58)

I sense frustration in Jesus' words through this section. The perfect Son of God has a perfect right to be irritated when people are so blind in their sin and unbelief that they will not

let the light of His saving presence dawn in their hearts.

Do you not hear His frustration when the people ask about His **identity**? "Who are you?" they demanded. The Greek sentence that follows is hard to translate. The NIV renders it this way: "Just what I've been claiming all along." The NRSV has this: "Why do I speak to you at all?" My own attempt to rephrase Him would go something like this: "I am just what I've been trying to tell you from the start."

Heavy responsibility tends to age people prematurely. Have you noticed? Check the photos of any modern President of the United States at his inauguration, at the midpoint of his first term and after four years. You'll see lines on his face and gray hair that seem to have come unnaturally fast. You'll see furrows on his brow. You'll sometimes see melancholy in his eyes. I think that very thing happened to Jesus and made Him look older than His years. It's right here in this text. Did you see it? When He said He was at least as old as Abraham, the crowd gave its collective sense that Jesus wasn't older than, oh, maybe 50. Best evidence says He was born around 6 B.C. and this conversation took place in the spring of A.D. 30. So He's only 35 - **but looks 50!** You try to carry the weight of the world on your shoulders and see if it doesn't age you!

### "I Am"

The most dramatic single statement Jesus makes, as to who He is, in this totally astounding context is in verse 58. Before even reading that verse, however, I need to help you understand how un-arrogant, un-egotistical, un-self-centered, and un-narcissistic His words are. I'll be the first to admit that His claim is either outrageous or a falsehood - except for the fact that He backs it up as the God-honoring truth and has it verified from God by His resurrection from the dead. To cite Jesus' own justification for stating who He is so bluntly: He was committed to the truth - the truth that would set people free - and utterly refused to be a "liar" (that's His word at v.55) by withholding the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in response to their "Who are you?" question that was on the floor.

Here is the single most comprehensive answer to their query: **"I am!"** That's it. "But 'I am what?' somebody wants to know.

Well, He has already said "I am light" and "I am water" and "I am bread." Later in this Gospel, He will say things like "I am the good shepherd," "I am the life," "I am the way," etc. But just to say "I am!" says all those things in a single sound byte - and more too (cf. 8:24, 28). It says: **I Am the Creator God Almighty Who Loves You So Desperately I Will Not Stay Away From You in Your Fallen, Hopeless World But Will Come to You to Save You in Person!** That's who Jesus is, always has been, and always will be.

"Very truly, I tell you, before Abraham was, I am (Gk, ego eimi)" can be heard as nothing other than a claim to deity. It is the clearest and fullest yet made from Jesus' own mouth in the Gospel of John - although it is front and center in the Prologue. **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory . . ."** (John 1:1,14).

When God called Moses to deliver the Israelites from their bondage in Egypt, this is what He told the prophet-deliverer:

But Moses said to God, **"If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?"** God said to Moses, **"I AM WHO I AM."** He said further, **"Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you' "** (Ex.3:13-14).

Jesus will use the same designation for Himself later in responding to the high priest's challenge to His authority - a self-designation whose clear claim makes Him tear His clothes and charge Jesus with blasphemy.

Again the high priest asked Him, **"Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?"** Jesus said, **"I am; and 'you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power,' and 'coming with the clouds of heaven.' "**

Then the high priest tore His clothes and said, **"Why do we still need witnesses? You have heard his blasphemy! What is your decision?"** All of them condemned Him as deserving death (Mark 14:61-64).

To their credit, the high priest and the Sanhedrin were right to call this blasphemy and a claim worthy of death - **unless it was**

the God-honoring truth about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth. Indeed, the crowd present for this confrontation and claim in John 8 got the point of His claim. When He used "I am" as a self-designation, "they picked up stones to throw at him" (8:59a) because of the obvious blasphemy they heard in that claim - unless it was the God-honoring truth about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

Jesus could not refuse to answer their question "Who are you?" with anything short of the truth without being - as He had already said - a liar like some of them. He said He was here to honor His Father by telling them the truth, just as their leaders were following suit with their father (i.e., satan) by telling lies (8:43-47). Heaven is light; satan's principality is darkness. God deals in the truth; the devil deals in dishonesty and treachery. Jesus is "from above" and "not of this world"; His enemies that day were "from below" and "of this world" (8:23). All who believe in Him receive eternal life; all who reject Him will die in their sins (8:24).

At various times in John's Gospel, Jesus is accused by His enemies of "making" Himself divine (cf. 5:18; 10:33; 19:7). That is, they accused Him of making a false and offensive, arrogant and sacrilegious boast about Himself. To the contrary, Jesus preferred to let His life and actions bear witness to His deity. He seldom made a verbal assertion of His deity, but He never turned away the confession of one who had seen the truth. Occasionally a conversation such as this one forced Him either to make the claim flatly or to be guilty of dishonesty Himself.

There is no arrogance here. There is no sacrilege. There is simply the central bedrock of Jesus' identity which becomes at one and the same time the anchor-point of saving faith and the solid rock against which unbelief is dashed and broken to its own eternal destruction.

### Conclusion

Sin forces you to judge everybody and everything by worldly standards. It takes eternity out of the picture. It scrambles and confuses reality so that you no longer know who Jesus is, who the people of faith are, or - eventually - even who you are and were meant to be. Then you die. You die in sin - and without hope. Don't let satan blind you to the identity of **The Great I Am**

**and His purpose for your life.**

**Eternity has something better in mind for you.**