

“Life’s Greatest Question”

Mark 8:27-30; Hebrews 1:1-3 ¹

This has been another interesting week in the news. The Episcopal Church, in its annual meeting in Anaheim, California, continued its march toward recognition of homosexual marriage, over the objections of many of its members. President Obama nominated Dr. Francis Collins, head of The Human Genome Project, to head the National Institutes of Health, a nomination being criticized because Dr. Collins is a Christian. And Walter Cronkite, the revered former anchor of the CBS Evening News, experienced resurrection.

In addition, I noted in this week’s *Laptop* that a recent LifeWay survey found that the most common definitions of “successful parenting” include “children having good values” at 25 percent, “being happy adults” at 25 percent, “finding success in life” at 22 percent, and “being a good person” at 19 percent. Only 9 percent of the 1,200 parents surveyed mentioned their children’s “being godly” or “having faith in God” as a measure of successful parenting.²

Finally, Virginia Intermont’s Trustees continue to consider the significance of that part of our mission statement that “affirms a commitment to Judeo-Christian values in an atmosphere of religious freedom and diversity”; but I fear that some decision-makers regard these words as archaic and unhelpful, thinking that the future strength of the college lies in another direction. I want to consider with you this morning how persons make such decisions as these.

When Walter Cronkite was the CBS News anchor, he was widely regarded as “the most trusted man in America.” Why do you suppose that was the case? The reason Mr. Cronkite was trusted was that people believed that what he reported was true to what was actually the case, not the result of the spin-doctoring that is so often the rule with news today.

Now the idea of something being “true to what actually is the case” is a crucial point. The concept of “true Truth,” the idea that there is Truth that is true always and everywhere, has fallen upon hard times in our day. Postmodern philosophy has been so successful in destroying the idea of true or absolute Truth that it’s not uncommon these days to hear people talking about “my truth” and “your truth” as if such things actually existed.

In today’s world, it’s considered politically correct to believe whatever “truth” you want . . . so long as your beliefs do not include the premise that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God. You can believe whatever craziness you want to, and you can worship whatever gods suit your fancy, so long as you don’t affirm that there is such a thing as Truth that is always and everywhere true, revealed by the one God to whom we are all accountable.

In his powerful book, *The Divine Conspiracy*, Professor Dallas Willard points out that we “cling to bumper slogans, body graffiti, and gift shop nostrums that in our profound upside-down-ness somehow seem deep but in fact make no sense: ‘Stand up for your rights’ sounds so good. How about ‘All I ever needed to know I learned in kindergarten’? And ‘Practice random kindness and senseless acts of beauty’? and so forth.

Dr. Willard notes that “Such sayings contain a tiny element of truth. But if you try to actually plan your life using them you are immediately in deep, deep trouble. They will head you 180 degrees in the

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the First Baptist Church of Bristol, Virginia on July 19, 2009.

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wrong direction. You might as well model your life on Bart Simpson or Seinfeld. But try instead ‘Stand up for your responsibilities’ or ‘I don’t know what I need to know and must now devote my full attention and strength to finding out’ (consider Proverbs 3:7 or 4:7) or ‘Practice routinely purposeful kindness and intelligent acts of beauty.’

“Putting *these* into practice immediately begins to bring truth, goodness, strength, and beauty into our lives,” Willard wrote. “But you will never find them on a greeting card, plaque, or bumper. They aren’t thought to be smart. What is truly profound is thought to be stupid and trivial . . . while what is actually stupid and trivial is thought to be profound. [We are flying our lives] upside down.”³

Originally a confirmed atheist, Dr. Francis Collins came to realize through his science that it takes both greater faith and a considerable amount of arrogance to be an atheist, choosing to reject all the evidence that stands against that view. Just as scientific discoveries take place when we take seriously the evidence that indicates that there is something beyond what we currently know, so we find God by taking seriously the considerable and persistent evidence that there is something—indeed, Someone—beyond life as we know it. Dr. Collins chose to believe that evidence and to become a Christian.

Speaking about The Human Genome Project, Dr. Collins wrote that “Together, we determined all three billion letters of the human genome, our own DNA instruction book It is hard to get your mind around how much information this is. . . .

“Suppose we decided to take a little time this morning to read the letters of the human genome together, just to express our awe at God’s creation. If we took turns reading, and agreed to stick with it until we were all the way through, we would be here for thirty-one years! And you have all that information inside each of the 100 trillion cells of your body.”⁴

Now those who resist the idea of true Truth have no way to explain such incredible things except by appeal to mindless, purposeless, random sequences of events, sequences that by definition cannot be depended upon to be repeated. And it’s important to note that persons who take such positions are not foolish enough to try to live in such a fashion in any area of their lives except moral judgment. We all know that there is indeed Truth that is always and everywhere true, or else our planes would not fly, our medicines would not work, our cars would not run, and our buildings would fall down.

The fact of the matter is that true Truth does exist, even in—perhaps *especially* in—the sphere of moral judgment. And it is by consulting this Truth—and only here—that we find any workable answers to what marriage should look like, what good science involves, how good parenting is to be evaluated, and to what the phrase “Judeo-Christian values” rightly refers.

Sadly, human efforts to deny moral Truth have a long history—almost to the very first human words ever recorded (Genesis 3:1-10). You and I, too, are amazingly adept at avoiding the obvious. And it’s for that reason that the following conversation took place:

“*You are a king, then?*”

“*You say that I am a king, and you are right,*” Jesus said. “*I was born for that purpose. **And I came to bring truth to the world.** All who love the truth recognize that what I say is true.”*

³ Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering Our Hidden Life in God* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1998), pp. 9-10.

⁴ Cal Thomas, “President Obama’s excellent choice troubles secularists,” *Bristol Herald-Courier*, July 18, 2009, A14.

“What is truth?” Pilate asked (John 18:37-38).

Did you get that? When asked about the reason He came to earth, Jesus didn’t say anything about sacrifice, or love, or forgiveness. While such dynamics were certainly at work, what Jesus said was, “I have come to bring truth to the world.” Earlier that evening, Jesus had told His disciples, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one can come to the Father except through me*” (John 14:6). Any honest examination of the concept of “truth” must deal with Jesus’ claim that not only does Truth exist, but that He IS Truth . . . and so we return to our text in Mark 8.

The Bible tells us that *Jesus and his disciples left Galilee and went up to the villages of Caesarea Philippi. As they were walking along, he asked them, “Who do people say that I am?”*

“Well,” they replied, “some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, and others say you are one of the other prophets.”

Then Jesus asked, “Who do you say I am?” (Mark 8:27-29; also Matthew 16:13-20; Luke 9:18-20).

I hope that by now you can sense that this is no idle theological question, but the greatest question in all of life. And when Peter replied with “*You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God*” (Matthew 16:16), he said far more than he knew. You and I, too, do well to consider that when we affirm that “*Jesus Christ is Lord*” (2 Corinthians 4:5; Philippians 2:11), we’re making the outrageous claim that “Jesus [of Nazareth] is utterly central to all that humans can know or experience. There is nothing imaginable that is irrelevant to him or to which he is irrelevant. There is no quarter of human learning in which he is not the central figure.”⁵

When we say that “*Jesus Christ is Lord,*” we affirm that He is the Creator of all things, the Sustainer of all things, the Goal of all things, the Redeemer of all things, and the Judge of all things. We are affirming that the entire created order is contingent upon Him at every point and in every moment (cp. Colossians 1:15-17; Psalm 33:6).⁶

To say that “*Jesus Christ is Lord*” is to affirm that Jesus of Nazareth is Truth in every conceivable way. As C.S. Lewis pointed out, “There is no neutral ground in the universe; every square inch, every split second, is claimed by God and counter claimed by Satan.”⁷ And this means that no matter what you and I do for a living, no matter whether we’re at home or at work, shopping or playing, there are no neutral activities, no activities without spiritual significance.

The affirmation that “Jesus is Lord” means that God is at work, right now, right here, creating a new kind of person, persons who are allowing God to so shape their character that they are willing, ready, and eager to spend eternity with Him; persons who are choosing to join themselves together in a new kind of spiritual community that only God can build; persons who have been granted the ability to understand where God is at work and who have discovered the glad truth that nothing else in life really matters except to be a part of that work.

Have you ever wondered why it is that the glories of nature stir us all, Christians and non-Christians alike? Have you ever wondered why even the most hardened atheist finds that a forest dawn prompts tears,

⁵ Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 44.

⁶ Litfin, p. 39.

⁷ C.S. Lewis, “Christianity and Culture,” in *Christian Reflections*, ed. Walter Hooper (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), p. 33.

or laughter, or joy? Nature moves us because in its glory we sense creation's Song of praise to its Creator, a glorious fulfillment of its God-given nature.

Christians are moved by such beauty as our own spirits join the Song. Unbelievers are moved because they wish to join the Song, but cannot. It's as though they're cut off from a joy they've never really known, but that they somehow seem to remember.⁸

Oh, my friends, there is nothing more awesome, nothing more exciting, nothing more rewarding than the awareness that the Lord of the Universe is at work pushing back the Darkness and bringing in the Kingdom of Light, in real time, through our lives. We have to experience it to understand it, and the most wonderful parts of the Story lie ahead.

It was of these wonders that Roger Stanley spoke last week on his way to the Heavenly City. Unavailable to us, and apparently unconscious, Roger said several times, "I believe." "Things are clearer to me now." "Now I understand."

My friend, if as you sit here this morning you're still trying to organize your life around what you want and around what you think will be good for you, then you don't yet understand. If you still think of the money in your bank account as "your money," then you don't get it yet. If you still think life is about you, then you don't get it yet.

If you're still trying to say to yourself that Jesus was "a good example" or "a wise teacher," then no matter what else you may say, you're still left in the end with a life that is the result of the random fluctuations of chance atoms. You're left morally adrift, with no anchor, compass, guide, or rule by which to evaluate government appointments, trustworthy science, successful parenting, academic excellence, or moral virtue.

Jesus' question, "***Who do you say I am?***" is the greatest, most central, most fundamental question in all of life. Your answer affects every choice you make, and it will determine your destiny.

The Bible says, "*Long ago, God spoke many times and in many ways to our ancestors through the prophets. But now in these final days, he has spoken to us through his Son. God promised everything to the Son as an inheritance, and through the Son he made the universe and everything in it. The Son reflects God's own glory, and everything about him reflects God exactly. He sustains the universe by the mighty power of his command. After he died to cleanse us from the stain of sin, he sat down in the place of honor at the right hand of the majestic God of heaven*" (Hebrews 1:1-3).

That's what the Bible says. Who do YOU say Jesus is?

⁸ Tim Stafford, "How Tim Keller found Manhattan," *Christianity Today*, June 2009, 22.