

**Christ Presbyterian Church**  
**Edina, Minnesota**  
**July 6 & 10, 2011**  
**John Crosby**  
**Building Block #3: “The Unique Christ”**  
**Colossians 1:15-23; Acts 4:12**

This is the third week of our "Building Blocks" series. We decided to do this series after my return from Sabbatical, in light of the turmoil rocking our society that extends even into the mainline churches. We thought it was important to 'go on the record' about what was most important to CPC. So we began with a question: How Do We Hear God Speak?—through the Story of Bible and talked about the Authority of Scripture. In last week's sermon, Paul preached on how Christianity is different than all other religions, and today we want to expand on that by asking, "What is so Different About Jesus?" Next week, we'll talk about a Biblical view of sexuality in a confused world and then finish this sermon series with "Why Can't We All Just Get Along?"—talking about true unity in a church that has 30,000 denominations! Some good food for thought!

TODAY: What do we say when someone asks, "Can Jesus really be only way? Do you really believe that all who are not Christians are going to Hell?" For many in our pluralistic, tolerant culture, this is still the stumbling that the Apostle Paul talked about in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, making us uncomfortable with feeling narrow-minded... Is there another way to look at this issue? Let's start with a story in the early days of the church. Peter and John, two followers of Jesus, are going to the Temple to pray when a beggar asks them for money. Seeing that he was lame, Peter said, "I don't have any money but I tell you what: in the name of the Lord Jesus, get up and walk"... and off the man jumps, healed! Here's what happens next....

“The rulers had Peter and John brought before them and began to question them: “By what power or what name did you do this (healing of a lame man)?” Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, “Rulers and elders of the people! If we are being called to account today for an act of kindness shown to a lame man and are being asked how he was healed, then know this, you and all the people of Israel: It is by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified but whom God raised from the dead, that this man stands before you healed. Jesus is ‘the stone you builders rejected, which has become the cornerstone.’ ***Salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved.*** ***When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*** But since they could see the man who had been healed standing there with them, there was nothing they could say.” [Acts 4:7-14]

Peter and James were only repeating what they had heard their Master Jesus saying. Remember the last night of his life? Jesus says this to his friends:

“Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God; believe also in me. My Father’s house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am. You know the way to the place where I am going.” Thomas said to him, “Lord, we don’t know where you are going, so how can we know the way?” Jesus answered, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really know me, you will know my Father as well.” [John 14:1-6]

Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” How can that not be seen as exclusive? I'd like to take those three statements in reverse order and see what they say to us and the world today. When Jesus says that He is the Life, he is stating that He alone has Eternal Life, the doorway to Heaven. What does that do to our view of Heaven and who does or does not get in?

Much of what I am going to say about this comes straight from a powerful talk I heard John Ortberg give here at our CPC Leadership Day in January. It was a new picture of heaven for me, and I've chewed on it for months. Some of the following will be “straight Ortberg” and some thoughts I have had.

People have this cartoon idea that heaven will be filled with whatever you like. It will be the eternal pleasure factory, so whatever your idea of pleasure is...the eternal Palm Springs, the eternal Las Vegas, the eternal Disney World, the eternal Branson, Missouri... whatever your idea, then that's going to be heaven.

But here's the clearest thing you need to know about heaven: heaven is life with God. Heaven is life with God...uninterrupted life with God... the Bible is about life with God. God created human beings so they could know community with Him. God would be with the man and woman in the garden in the cool of the day. That's a picture of life with God. Then that gets interrupted, so the temple comes—a picture of life with God. Then Jesus comes and He is called Emmanuel, God with us. All the way through to the end we have this picture of what the afterlife, heaven, will be like. It's described as a city because it's a picture of community. In Revelation 21, John says, “Now the dwelling of God is with people, and He will live with them.” He is hitting us over the head with this. “They will be His people, and God Himself will be with them and be their God.” Heaven is the “with-God” life.

Jesus says, “Now this is eternal life that they (His followers—you and me) may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent.” *This* is eternal life...not the pleasure factory...that people might know You, God. Not just know about You...know You the way that a climber knows Mt. Everest, the way a baseball player knows the game of baseball, the way someone who is in love knows the one they love. To be immersed completely, fully, every pore of my being in the experience of God in the presence of God and the God kind of life—this is eternal life.

What does that mean? Well that means God is everywhere. Heaven is the “with-God” life ... Now, two challenges come out of that:

First, the logical question is...Who is going to make the cut? How little can you believe? How much can you disagree with? How far can you get off track and still make the cut? How mean is

God going to be? When they're asking that, although they don't use the words, the question they're really asking is...What are the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven when you die? Okay, we don't put it in that language because then you see how goofy it is, but that's the question...What are the minimal entrance requirements?

It's a legitimate question and I wish Jesus would tell me! But nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus ever say, "Now I will proclaim to you the minimal entrance requirements for getting into heaven when you die."

Imagine I had gone to Laura on our wedding day and said, "Laura, I want to know what's the absolute least I can do and still be married to you. What's the lowest level of commitment? What are the fewest affirmations? What are the smallest promises? What's the least amount of fidelity? What are the minimal entrance requirements for husbandhood with you?" It would have been a very short ceremony because it's not the kind of thing by nature that can be realized by someone who is pursuing the minimal entrance requirements. Somehow it's less about passing a test with a D- ... and more about a relationship.

The second challenge: John Ortberg knocked me out when he said something I'd like us to repeat out loud: ***In heaven it will be very hard to avoid God.*** But do I really want that, to ALWAYS BE AROUND A TOTALLY HOLY GOD, who cannot stand ANY sin? Has anybody here ever done something that hurt someone else's feelings? Lied/Lost Temper/Stole/Went Too Far Sexually/ Took Credit... okay, put your hands down, you sick people! I know something else about you, about all of us... You did not do that while your mother was watching you because that would take all the fun out of it, wouldn't it, if you did it while your mom was watching? You had to go someplace where your mom was not, to do something you knew your mom would not approve. Now you think about this. In heaven, there is no place where God is not.

Once you're in Heaven, there is no time for a quick run to Vegas. If you want to gossip or hoard or judge or self-promote or be cynical or be sarcastic or exclude somebody or get all puffed up or be selfish or be jealous, where are you going to go? God is everywhere there.

See, Heaven is not the pleasure factory; it is a community where qualities like humility and generosity of spirit and honesty and truthfulness and commitment to other people are as predictable as gravity is here. Heaven is the kind of place where people who want to sin would be miserable. It would be like going to a restaurant where there's no smoking allowed if you are deeply, deeply addicted to nicotine. If you don't smoke, that restaurant would be great. It would be a breath of fresh air. If you're addicted, it would be a miserable experience. Heaven is the with-God life that nothing, not even death, can interrupt.

John Ortberg also reminded me of a song called "Rock of Ages." Has anybody here ever heard of "Rock of Ages?" There's a fabulous line in it that says, "Be of sin the double cure, safe from wrath and make me pure." Fabulous thought: *Sin needs a double cure. Save me from wrath.* If God is any kind of a God, He is going to be mad at sin because it messes up His world, His creation. We mess up each other. We need to be saved from that wrath. In God's place, the hard part of saving is the making-me-pure part. I'm not sure I want that. See, if I do not want God and His kind of life now, if it would be kind of oppressive to me now, why in the world would I think I would want it when I could never, ever get away from it for a second just because I've died?

Dallas Willard puts it like this: "God will let everybody into heaven who can possibly stand it." Think about that for a minute. God will let everybody into heaven who can possibly stand it. Of course! What else would He do? Who else would He be? The problem is, as a sin-addicted person, I couldn't stand it RIGHT NOW. Neither could you. In our world, with a kind of cartoon way of thinking about Heaven, we think, "Of course, everybody wants to get into the pleasure factory and God is keeping people out." That sounds mean, exclusive...

The problem around heaven is everybody thinks about it as the pleasure life and not the *with-God* life.

So *who gets life*? Those who are thirsty to death. Last week I was preaching at our Table service for 20-somethings; right here in the first row were a group of guys, all leaning forward intently, even taking notes. I thought I must be preaching HOT! But when I asked Brad Jackson who they were, he told me it's a group of Alcoholic Anonymous guys who sit together every week and then meet at his house for a Bible Study. For them, knowing Jesus isn't about minimum requirements for entry to a heavenly park; it's about leaving a life that led to death and seeking "Life that is really life"... Ken Taylor translates Paul's experience in Philippians 4 that same way: '**so whatever it takes, I will be one who lives in the fresh newness of life of those Christ has raised from the dead.**' That's what I'm talking about!

*I AM THE TRUTH.* We live in a world filled with truth-claims and our society says, "Well, that's true for you, but not for me". There are two sides to the idea of Jesus being the 'only Truth.' CS Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, "I have been asked to tell you what Christians believe, and I am going to begin by telling you one thing that Christians don't need to believe. If you are a Christian, you *do not* have to believe that all the other religions are wrong all through. If you are an atheist you do have to believe that the main point in all the religions of the whole world is simply one huge mistake. If you are a Christian, you are free to think that all those religions, even the strange ones, contain at least some hint of the truth. When I was an atheist I had to try to persuade myself that most of the human race has always been wrong about the question that mattered to them most. When I became a Christian I was able to take a more liberal view"

That said, I believe that TRUTH often has particularity; there is either one God or many or none, but not *all* of above can be equally true. *Other religions are not all wrong*, but when they diverge it's like having these two amber pitchers in front of you, wondering whether it makes any difference to drink from one and put the other into your gas tank. It makes all the difference in the world, because Truth not only has particularity, it has consequences. All the sincerity in the world will not make my car run on iced tea or protect me if I drink gasoline.

Let me tell you why I am so passionate about Jesus' claim "I am the Truth." About ten years ago I was in a meeting of the local Presbyterian churches, called the Presbytery. We were considering a proposal to reach out to our growing Somali immigrant community, many of whom are Muslim. We had a young man coming to us from Princeton Seminary who was, at that time, the only Somali in the Western world that we knew of with a seminary degree from a Presbyterian school. He wanted to start a ministry to cabbies and other Somalis, preaching and teaching the Good News of Christ. I was so excited about this, I was thinking, "Where do I send the check? Can he live in our basement? When can we start?" However, the proposal ran into all kinds of opposition, both in committee and on the floor of the meeting.

One of my friends from another church said he was opposed to this type of evangelism, that he was a friend of the local imam and met with him for study and dialog monthly. "What am I supposed to tell him? How do I make him know that I respect his faith if I am paying someone to draw people out of Islam to Christianity? I was SO angry. I reminded him of our friends Peter and John, who said, "Do what you must, but we must obey God rather than human customs... there is no other name under heaven by which we must be saved." Eventually we started the ministry but different views of truth have eternal significance; we don't disrespect someone's faith when we share ours, especially if we're honest and build relationships.

Here is the reason for the decline of the mainline church—and any other church with a loss of conviction of need to be rescued, and confidence that God calls us to offer life—we are called to present that which sounds offensive without being offensive! Some day every person on planet earth will be judged by a Holy God, not be me or by you. I believe we can trust God to be the best judge. It's God's job not mine. I thank God that in Jesus Christ I see the bias of the God of Heaven. Our faith is that this God Jesus talked about will do the right thing by every person. He will not do anything unfair. Abraham said a long time ago, "Will not the Judge of all the earth do what is right?"

*I AM THE WAY*: With more clarity around Heaven and the Truth, we can go on. We need a WAY there but what we need is not a way to be allowed inside To Disney-World Heaven. We need a way to become the kind of people for whom heaven would be the fitting, appropriate, right, welcome place.

That WAY is shown by our Disciples in Acts 4—it is a Way of boldness where there used to be fear; a Way of love for one another where there used to be jealousy and exclusion; a Way of Life that brought a God-powerful healing presence wherever they went ... and people noted they had been with Jesus

What people are hungry for is not the right answer but for a Way of Real Life—a journey following King Jesus with meaning and joy. One of the benefits of my sabbatical was reading tons of books, including Citizens of London. It's the story of pre-WWII in England and their relation to the United States. All of you would have heard of the first Ambassador in the days before the war, Joseph Kennedy, the father of the late President. He was totally opposed to US involvement, believing that we should not alienate the Germans, that the English were doomed anyway. He increasingly opposed helping the English and finally was delighted to return to the US, having angered most of the British. His successor was Gilbert Winant, whose position was so important that he was met at the dock by the King of England. Rather than continue the arrogant representation of Kennedy, Winant began by saying to the cameras, "There is nowhere I would rather be than in England, with all of you." He traveled the city constantly, lifting spirits, begging more aid for the British of the American government. He would work to remove rubble from homes and offer orphans his cottage. He would walk down the street and say to the despairing, "What can the United States of America do for you today?" Who do you think made more allies for America?

Religious or spiritual arrogance, intolerance, contempt for the other are rife in our day and are an enormous problem in our world. Says John Ortberg again, "Truthfully, some of the most arrogant, smug, judgmental, exclusive, self-righteous, superior, cranky folks I have ever seen have been Christians. Do you know how I can say that? Because I know a lot of Christians, because I am one, and all that stuff is in me. We need to have this conversation in a spirit of

repentance and humility. How we treat people who differ around faith issues from us is really, really, really important.”

**JESUS AS THE WAY, WITH US POINTING TO JESUS:** Some of you aren't there yet; I encourage you to spend time with Jesus. Peter and John started as students of Jesus and learned about the TRUTH as much from what they saw as what they heard. Some of you need to come to Christ as broken/needful folks, seeking not religion but life that is really life...and many of us have believed in truth, tasted His life, and now need to be pointing others to WAY of life with healing love as Humble, courageous... so that others who look at this community would say, **“they took note they’d been with Jesus.”**

*The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.*