

WHY WE CAN BELIEVE IN JESUS

First in a series by Dr. Rick Perrin considering the Sacrament of the Lord's Supper, from Acts 2:14-23
"Men of Israel, listen to these words: Jesus the Nazarene, a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs which God performed through Him in your midst, just as you yourselves know...."
Acts 2:22

A little less than two months after Jesus' death and resurrection, the apostle Peter stepped before a crowd of thousands who were milling around the temple courtyard in Jerusalem. He demanded their undivided attention. *"Men of Israel,"* he shouted. *"Listen to these words!"* The crowd drew closer and quieted down. A few moments before, the apostles had burst into the temple complex speaking scores of languages that the people there that day knew from their home countries. You'd normally hear Hebrew and Aramaic spoken at the temple, and a smattering of Greek and Latin, but not these foreign tongues. So the throng had come swirling around to catch an earful of the sounds from home.

Turn with me to Acts chapter 2, verse 22. What Peter was about to say would cut through the tendency people have to believe everything, and anything, and nothing. The safe choice is perhaps everything. All the gods are equal. All religions lead to the same place. Every moral opinion is equal to all the others. That's what we're told. But if you believe everything, you'll believe anything—even the most preposterous things. Or, you'll believe only what you grew up with—the religion of your childhood. So, maybe the easiest choice is to believe nothing and to fill your mind with things that don't matter.

Many of us today have an opinion about who is going to win the Super Bowl this evening. Some of you are quite expert on the subject. Can the Giants beat the Patriots? Can Eli Manning overcome Tom Brady? Advertisers are betting big bucks that you'll tune in to find out. But who wins the Super Bowl isn't going to change your life much. And whether you buy a particular product isn't going to change the world. But what Peter was about to say has, and it will continue to do so.

Peter was speaking to people who were much like we are. But how do you cut through the clutter of beliefs, or the cynicism? How do you penetrate the hype of the Super Bowl and the static of pop culture and the hundreds of minor problems that suck up our attention each day? How do you get people to stop long enough to think hard about what's really important when they're used to not thinking at all? Somehow Peter did it, for what he said that day changed history. So like those people of two thousand years ago, let's gather around. *"Men of Israel, listen to these words!"* Maybe they'll change you and me. Notice in verse 22 that Peter's words do not appeal to our emotions. He's not interested in affecting our feelings. He wants to capture our minds. And to do that he tells them four things.

First, Peter places Jesus in a historical context. He refers to him as *"Jesus the Nazarene."* In other words, he says Jesus was from the town of Nazareth. Everybody there knew that, but Peter makes an important point. You could go to Nazareth if you wanted to. You could see the house Jesus lived in as a boy. You could walk into his

dad's carpenter shop. You could meet members of his family, talk to the rabbi at the synagogue, question Jesus' neighbors. Several years ago Barb and I took our sons to Plymouth Notch, Vermont to visit the home of Calvin Coolidge. If you go there you can shop in the general store that sat across the street. You can go into the house and see the room where Coolidge was sworn in as President of the United States in the early morning hours. You can look into his bedroom and see where Coolidge was sleeping that fateful night. You can see his hunting boots displayed and artifacts from his boyhood. And you come away from the experience with a sense that here was a real man, a man like us with an old-time Vermonter's personality. Peter was saying that if you went to Nazareth you could step into the context of Jesus' life. You'd know he was a real, historical person.

Second, Peter says that Jesus was authenticated by God. He was "*a man attested to you by God with miracles and wonders and signs.*" This doesn't shock us because we are used to hearing about the miracles of Jesus. But this is nevertheless an extremely unusual thing to say. Jesus healed the sick, made the lame walk, let the blind see and the deaf hear. He turned water into wine. He walked on top of the Sea of Galilee. He raised dead people back to life. Friends, people don't do this! I recall a faith healer a few years back who when his mother died became convinced that he could raise her back to life. He stuck her body in a deep freeze until the appointed day, then he laid her out on a table, thawed her body, and gave the command for her life to return. Guess what happened! Human beings don't have the power to do miracles—real miracles. So how did Jesus do it? A person may have the power to set aside the laws of nature only if God gives it to him. And God won't give that power to someone who opposes him. God gave that power to Jesus in order to let us know that he put his stamp of approval on Jesus, that he was authenticating Jesus' message. For that reason we ought to listen to what Jesus said, and pay attention to what he did. We must believe what Jesus tells us.

Third, Peter says Jesus performed these miracles in front of witnesses. God did these miracles through Jesus, Peter says, "*in your midst.*" It is legitimate to ask, did Jesus really do these miracles, or did people just made up stories about him? The followers of a great man often try to build up their heroes so that they become larger than life. For example, Barb and I visited the Isle of Patmos a few years ago and we saw the cave where John the apostle supposedly lived during his exile. The tour guide told the tourists, "Here is where the holy apostle laid his holy head and here is where he placed his holy hand." And sure enough, when I looked, the stone shelf that had been John's pillow had an indentation where his head rested, and there was a shallow hole in the rock where he had pressed his hand. It was quite amazing! And silly. So people could have made up stories about Jesus and his miracles. Some people think that's what happened. But Peter says to the crowd on Pentecost, these things were done in your midst. If you don't believe it, check around. You'll find plenty of witnesses who will tell you what they saw. You can find the very people who were healed. You might even get to meet the man named Lazarus who Jesus raised from the dead. Peter points to the miracles to back up the claim of who Jesus said he was. If he hadn't done these miracles, there would be plenty of people who would set the record straight and swear that they'd never happened. You don't appeal to eyewitnesses if those witnesses are going to contradict what you're saying.

Fourth, Peter says Jesus performed his miracles out in the open. *“Just as you yourselves know,”* he says. It was common knowledge what Jesus did, the kind of man he was, the power he possessed. We love to hear gossip and rumors about what a public figure has done in private. That’s why the tabloids line the checkout counter in the supermarkets. While you’re standing in line their headlines scream all the secrets of what a singer or an actor or a celebrity has done in secret. Believe them at your own risk. What you think you know you don’t really know. Peter says of Jesus, “Look, it’s no secret. You all know who he was and what he did.

Now, what’s the significance of Peter’s statement? It’s this: Jesus is what he seems to be. He has entered into our world and what we believe about him is true. “Wait a minute,” you say. “How do we know Peter actually said this? How do we know that Luke who wrote the book of Acts is reliable in what he reports?” It’s the same argument. Luke wrote only a few years after the events recorded in Acts had happened. The people who could testify to the truth of what is written there, or discredit it as a fraud, were still alive. Not all of them, but enough. Luke could not have hoped to write what he did and get away with falsehoods. There were plenty of people alive in the world who would have been all too happy to expose Christianity as a lie if they had been able to do it. But they couldn’t. Peter says, these things happened, “as you yourselves know.” And Luke says the same thing.

Dear friends, there is no other religion in all the world that is based on solid historical fact like Christianity is. There isn’t one! What that means is that we can and ought to believe in Jesus because he is who he said he is. If our faith is true, then it slices through the falsehoods and the pseudo-beliefs that the people of the world cling to. If what we know about Jesus is true, then it ought to be the most important thing in the world to us. It ought to affect how we live, what we make our priority. There is nothing wrong with enjoying the Super Bowl and all the other things that attract our attention. But Jesus Christ ought to be far more important to us than any of them. We must not allow ourselves to ignore what Jesus did for us, or to push it off to second place in our thinking.

Jesus went to the cross and died, taking the wrath of God upon himself, so that he might pay for the sins of sinners like you and me. We may receive forgiveness for our sins when we place our faith in him. And we can believe it because it’s all true. How important is Jesus Christ in your life? As we come to the Lord’s table and remember what he did on the cross, we can really believe it. And if it is really true, then you are really saved from your sins and that changes the way you live.

Preached by Dr. Rick Perrin on February 3 2008 at Cornerstone Presbyterian Church, 5637 Bush River Road, Columbia SC 29212 and Northwest YMCA on Kennerly Road. Tel. 803-772-1000
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