

CHURCH OF THE REDEEMER

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THE GREAT "I AM"

Herman Ridderbos, the noted Dutch New Testament scholar, writes: "The characteristic and remarkable features of the Johannine message of salvation are that it comes to expression in 'I am' statements, and that the 'I' is in effect the predicate: 'the light,' 'the resurrection,' etc. -- *am I*. That is true here as well. All that Jesus says of 'the resurrection and the life' is that it is he who constitutes them and that therefore those who believe in him receive the life that is no longer subject to the power of death. The resurrection and life he grants encompass both present and future because *he* encompasses both as the One in whom the Word reveals itself, the Word that was with God in the beginning and by whom all things were created and who is therefore also the Son of man in whose hands the Father has put the future government over all things, in keeping with the prophecy of Daniel (7:12f; cf. John 1:51; 3:13; 5:27; 17:2, 5, 24)."¹

There are seven of the "I Am" sayings.

1. "I am the bread of life" (John 6:35, 48). Jesus does not simply give bread; he is bread. This was said in a first-century setting in which bread was considered the basic necessity of life. In a similar vein Jesus said that he had come to give life and to give it abundantly (John 10:10).
2. "I am the light of the world" (8:12; 9:5). Jesus is the source of the world's illumination. This statement confirms what was said of him in the prologue (1:4-9).
3. "I am the door of the sheep" (10:7). Jesus is speaking of the entrance to a sheepfold, but evidently has in mind more than that. He is claiming to be the means by which sheep (his followers) have access into the presence of God and thus receive salvation,
4. "I am the good shepherd" (10:14-18). The imagery here is of care and provision for the sheep. It extends even to the shepherd's laying down his life for them. There is intimate knowledge of the sheep, of each one, and they know their shepherd well.
5. "I am the resurrection and the life" (11:25). Spoken in response to Martha after the death of her brother, this statement is significant for asserting not merely that Jesus gives or brings resurrection and life, but that he is resurrection and life. In him, the life eternal, are put into proper perspective our life in this world and the death which brings it to an end.
6. "I am the way, and the truth, and the life" (14:6). Here again eternal life is in view: Jesus is the means to and the embodiment of eternal life. The exclusiveness of Jesus as the way to eternal life is underscored in the following statement, "No one comes to the Father, but by me."
7. "I am the true vine" (15:1, 5). Jesus again emphasizes himself as the source of life and underscores the importance of abiding in him.

In addition to these predicative or attributive sayings, there are, as Millard Erickson points out, "passages where John uses the verb *to be* to express Jesus' absolute existence. While some see allusions to Exodus 3:14 in the various attributive statements we have listed, that is debatable. Where John uses the verb *to be* to express absolute existence, however; we have direct references or parallels to that Old Testament passage. In John 8:24 Jesus calls on his hearers to believe that 'I am,' and in verse 28 he predicts that when they have lifted up the Son of man, they will know that 'I am.' The most impressive statement,

however, is found in 8:58, ‘Truly, truly I say to you, before Abraham was, I am.’ The Greek here is much stronger than the English translation. What Jesus actually said was, ‘Before Abraham was born (*genesthai*), I am (*egō eimi*). Friedrich Büchsel comments, ‘This is the only passage in the NT where we have the contrast between *einai* and *genesthai*.’ Whatever significance we may attach to Jesus’ words, it is instructive to observe the reaction of the Jews: ‘So they took up stones to throw at him’ (v. 59), evidently regarding his statement as a blasphemous claim to equality with God or, in other words, a claim to deity. Guthrie says, ‘There seems little doubt, therefore, that the statement of 8:58 is intended to convey in an extraordinary way such exclusively divine qualities as changelessness and pre-existence. The divine implication of the words would alone account for the extraordinary anger and opposition which the claim immediately aroused.’”² Finally, “Jesus has repeatedly mentioned resurrection on the last day (5:21, 25-29; 6:39-40). In this he has been in line with mainstream Judaism. But these references have also insisted that he alone, under the express sanction of the Father, would raise the dead on the last day. The same truth is now repeated in the pithy claim, *I am the resurrection and the life*. Jesus’ concern is to divert Martha’s focus from an abstract belief in what takes place on the last day, to a personalized belief in him who alone can provide it. Just as he not only gives the bread from heaven (6:27) but is himself the bread of life (6:35), so also he not only raises the dead on the last day (5:21, 25ff) but is himself the resurrection and the life. There is neither resurrection nor eternal life outside of him.”³

CONCLUSION: J. C. Ryle, in his handling of our passage in John 11:25-26, writes: “In this and the following verses, our Lord corrects Martha’s feeble and inadequate notions, and sets before her more exalted views of Himself. As Chrysostom says, ‘He shows her that He needed none to help Him.’ He tells her that He is not merely a human teacher of the resurrection, but the Divine Author of all resurrection, whether spiritual or physical, and the Root and Fountain of all life. ‘I am that high and holy One who by taking man’s nature upon Me, have ennobled his body, and made its resurrection possible. I am the great First Cause and Procurer of man’s resurrection, the Conqueror of death, and the Saviour of the body. I am the great Spring and Source of all life, and whatever life any one has, eternal, spiritual, physical, is all owing to Me. Separate from Me there is no life at all. Death came by Adam: life comes by Me.’ All must feel that this is a deep saying, so deep that we see but a little of it. One thing only is very clear and plain: none could use this language but one who knew and felt that He was very God. No prophet or Apostle ever spoke in this way. I do not feel sure that the two first words of this verse do not contain a latent reference to the great title of Jehovah, ‘I am.’ The Greek quite permits it.

“*[He that believeth . . . Me . . . dead . . . live.]* This sentence receives two interpretations. Some, as Calvin and Hutcheson, hold that ‘dead’ here means *spiritually* dead. – Others, as Bullinger, Gualter, Brentius, Musculus, hold that ‘dead’ means *bodily* dead. -- With these last I entirely agree, partly because of the point that our Lord is pressing on Martha, partly because of the awkwardness of speaking of a believer as ‘dead.’ Moreover, the expression is a verb -- ‘though he has died,’ and not an adjective -- ‘is a dead person.’ The sense I believe to be this: ‘He that believes in Me, even if he has died, and been laid in the grave, like thy brother, shall yet live, and be raised again through my power. Faith in Me unites such an one to the Fountain of all life, and death can only hold him for a short time. As surely as I, the Head, have life, and cannot be kept a prisoner by the grave, so surely all my members, believing in Me, shall live also.

“—*[And whosoever liveth . . . believeth . . . never die.]* In this verse our Lord seems to me to speak of living believers, as in the last verse He had spoken of dead ones. Here, then, He makes the sweeping declaration, that ‘every one who believes in Him shall never die:’ that is, ‘he shall not die eternally,’ as the Burial Service of the Church of England has it. The second death shall have no power over him. The sting of bodily death shall be taken away. He partakes of a life that never ends, from the moment that he believes in Christ. His body may be laid in the grave for a little season, but only to be raised after a while to glory; and his soul lives on uninterruptedly for evermore, and, like the great risen Head, dieth no more.”⁴

ENDNOTES

¹H. Ridderbos, *The Gospel of John: A Theological Commentary* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 398.

²M. Erickson, *The Word Became Flesh: A Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Baker, 1991), p. 27.

³D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1991), p. 412.

⁴J. C. Ryle, *Expository Thoughts on The Gospels: John 10:10-to The End* (rpt. Zondervan, 1951), p. 87.