

“The Incomparable One”

Robert M. Thompson, Pastor

Corinth Reformed Church
150 Sixteenth Avenue NW
Hickory, North Carolina 28601
828.328.6196 corinthtoday.org

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“What a beautiful name it is – the name of Jesus.” (Hillsong)

John 1:1-18

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Absolute adjectives

Don't you just love adjectives? What would language be if all we had were nouns, like flower, meeting or fan? With adjectives we can say, “*exquisite* flower,” “*dreary* meeting,” and “*zealous* fan.”

I sometime misuse adjectives, as I did last week. In doing so, however, I delighted some South Carolina Gamecock fans who were rather pleased that I called Clemson's head coach “notorious,” which means “famous or well known, typically for some bad quality or deed.” My inadvertent blunder offered some solace to those who became nauseated in church with complimentary references to Clemson.

After a break of several weeks to study the Sermon on the Mount, we are returning to the Apostles Creed for Lent, specifically the second paragraph of the creed.

For my sermon title, I needed a precise adjective, one that would describe Jesus as “one of a kind.” It had to be an *absolute* adjective. An absolute adjective is not gradable; it cannot be comparative or superlative. Some examples include dead, perfect, and pregnant. One cannot be *more* dead, *extremely* perfect, or *very* pregnant. Some pregnant women might disagree with that last one in their third trimester.

In theory, “unique” should fit my purpose. We grammar nerds chafe when someone calls a flower “*very* unique” or one vacation spot “*more* unique” than another. Aaarrgh! “Unique” comes from the Latin word *unus* (“one”), and means “one of a kind.” The problem is that words evolve, and in popular usage “unique” has come to have a

secondary meaning of “unusual.” Sadly, common use trumps grammar as time passes. Today basketball players are *really* unique, butterflies can be *more* unique, and coffee might be *extremely* unique.

I settled on a very unique adjective: “incomparable.” I challenge you to correctly use (and yes, I know that I just split an infinitive) incomparable in a sentence with a modifier. It means matchless, peerless, unsurpassable, inimitable. Incomparable accurately means “without compare,” and seems to be an unspoiled absolute adjective.

Jesus is the incomparable one. When we recite from the Apostles’ Creed the words, “I believe... in Jesus Christ his only begotten Son,” we are declaring three ways that he is incomparable. Jesus. Christ. His only begotten Son. All three names or ideas are found in the prologue to John’s Gospel.

I could easily spend an entire year preaching on John 1:1-18. John begins with two universal ideas to introduce Jesus: words and light. No matter when or where a human being lives, words and light are familiar ideas. That’s his point. John’s is a universal gospel. In calling Jesus word and light, John connects with both Jews and Gentiles, with anyone who reads or hears his message.

His only begotten Son

Although the Apostles’ Creed affirms many complex and deep ideas, there is only one word that sounds strange to modern ears because we almost never use it outside of church: “begotten.” It’s a Bible word.

You will not find “begotten” in most of the Bibles carried by people in this room. It’s in the same category as “thee” and “thou” – an older English word that is familiar to readers of the 1611 King James Version. The best-known verse in the Bible for many people inside and outside the church, John 3:16, uses the word:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son....

If we had read today’s text from the King James Version, we would have encountered this word twice – first in verse 14 and again in verse 18.

The word became flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth.

No man hath seen God at any time, the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him.

Notice both in the Apostles Creed and the King James Version, that we are trying to understand not “begotten” but “only begotten.” “Begotten” or “begat” in old English usually refers to the father’s role in reproduction. The woman’s counterpart is “bore.” Thus the Bible says that Mary “bore” Jesus, but never that Joseph “begat” him.”

However, the Greek word (*genos*) is broader than reproduction. It actually means “kind, race, family,” like the word “genus” in biology. It’s a *category*. That’s why it works for fathering a child. When I begat and Linda bore our children Phil, Cara, and Jeni, they were all the same category as we are.

But the word is broader than human reproduction. *Genos* is used in the New Testament to refer to kinds of fish (Matthew 13:47), kinds of demons (Mark 9:29), and kinds of languages (1 Corinthians 12:10). It’s also used of a group of people either related by biology or geography, much the same way we might use “Native Americans” (biological kind) or “the British” (who may be African or Chinese or European by race, but are all citizens of the empire). The root idea of *genos* is kind or category.

I wouldn’t belabor this point if it weren’t important. The phrase in the Creed, “only begotten,” is one compound word in Greek (*monogenes*). It is just what you would expect – the word “only” plus “begotten.” The word is used in Luke’s gospel not of Jesus, but of the “only child” in a family. Three times Luke (7:12; 8:32; 9:48) describes the healing of someone’s *monogenes* child. The illness or death of any child is heart-wrenching for a parent, but the grief is compounded when the child is *monogenes*. We can even set aside the grief and just focus on two parents with an only child. That child is their world, their hope, their glory.

This has led to some confusion among some who quote the creed or know the language of the King James Version. Both the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons, for different reasons, argue from this word that Jesus had a beginning, that God the Father created him. Some might even suggest that God “begat” him in the same way that Greek gods birthed other gods.

This is not what John means. What he’s going for is “one of a kind.” This is what the *New International Version* and other more contemporary versions mean when they use the phrase, “one and only.” The word “father” in verse 14 doesn’t have a definite article. The verse can be translated, “And we have seen his glory, glory comparable to a father’s only child.” The focus is on Jesus as The Incomparable One.

Who or what in your life is incomparable? I have two parents, three children, and lots of colleagues and friends, but only one wife. She is without compare as the object of my affection and loyalty. I enjoy watching many teams playing a variety of sports, but the Carolina Panthers are incomparable in terms of my interest. Nothing else is even close to that category. I eat lots of food, but ice cream is unquestionably at the top of my culinary temptations.

John presents Jesus as God’s one and only Son, The Incomparable One. He says Jesus came into the world so that all who believe in him would have the right to become children of God. God has many children, but Jesus is God’s one-of-a-kind Son. He is the only human being in whom we have seen God’s glory in the flesh, conveying God’s grace and speaking God’s truth.

There may be some truth in what Confucius or Buddha or Mohammed said. But Jesus is incomparable as the Word of God, who was with God and was God from the beginning, before he created all that exists (1:1-3). He is incomparable as the true Light that lights every person (1:9).

Christ

The other three ways the Creed identifies The Incomparable One are more familiar to us – “Jesus Christ... our Lord.” We’ll save “Lord” for next week’s sermon. Today, let’s spend a few moments reminding ourselves about “Jesus” and “Christ,” both of which appear in John 1, but not until verse 17.

These words need explanation for the opposite reason that “only begotten” needs explanation. These are so common in the New Testament and in our church vocabulary that they roll off our tongue without sufficient thought. Let’s start with “Christ.” Is that a name or a title? Surprisingly, it didn’t begin as either one.

The word “Christ” is a rarity in language in that a description that was originally general became absolute. Usually it works the other way around. Words like Kleenex, Jell-o, Sharpie, Bandaid, and Power Point are all very specific items whose brand names became common words.

The Greek word behind “Christ” traveled the other direction. It was an ordinary word that today is used almost exclusively for The Incomparable One. The original meaning was an adjective meaning something like “greased” or “rubbed” or “smeared.” The verb *chriein* (to rub) in secular Greek was used of things like rubbing poison on an arrow or spreading whitewash on a wall or applying cosmetics to the face. As the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology* says, “Where it refers to people, it even tends toward the disrespectful” (Vol. II, 334).

How then did *chriein* emerge into such an important word for Jesus? In the Jewish tradition, two important roles were formally set aside in a public ceremony of consecration, much like what we call the inauguration of a president, or, in the church, an installation of a pastor or elder. For both king and priest, oil was applied in the ceremony to symbolize the moment when power was transferred to that person to exercise the exclusive right of the office. In America, the President places his hand on the Bible, raises his hand, and repeats the oath of office. In Israel, the king or high priest knelt and was *chrio-ed*, anointed with oil. From that moment, he was to be treated as God’s anointed one.

Over time, the adjective, anointed, became a noun, and there was also the expectation of a coming One who would be incomparable as The Anointed One, who would combine the offices of high priest and king and even prophet. To this day, the Jewish idea of the anointed one is a future idea, at least for most Jews. The comparable Hebrew word is “Messiah.”

When the New Testament refers to Jesus as “the anointed one,” it’s always in the past. The *christos* has come. This is The Incomparable One we expected. There never was nor will there be another One. By the time Paul and others were writing letters and then the evangelists wrote the Gospels, this very common adjective had become not only a title but another name for Jesus.

Sometimes they would use the definite article, “the anointed one,” as Buckeyes do with “The Ohio State University,” to emphasize its uniqueness. But increasingly it became an alternate name for Jesus, and often carried no definite article at all, any more than you would say of me, “This is the Bob.” A name rarely needs a definite article, and “Christ” usually doesn’t have one in the New Testament, including here in John 1. This word, too, then, points to Jesus as The Incomparable One.

Worldwide, the name “Christ” is uniquely applied to Jesus, as far as I know. He owns this title all to himself.

Jesus

Now we come to the most familiar name for The Incomparable One: Jesus. It’s by far the most common name or title for him in the New Testament, appearing 1310 times, including an average of 240 times in each of the four Gospels and in every New Testament book except 3 John. By contrast, “Christ” appears fewer than 500 times, and “only begotten” as a reference to Jesus, only 6 times.

The name “Jesus” was in the top 100 of boys’ names in the U.S. for most of the 1990s and 2000s, mostly due to immigration from Mexico. Mexico is overwhelmingly Catholic, and Catholics name their babies “Jesus” exponentially more often than white Protestants do. We may find it somewhere between shocking and amusing when we encounter the name, such as when a recent catering order was signed by “Jesus.”

It shouldn’t bother us. When God told both Joseph and Mary to name their baby “Jesus,” he was using a name already common for boys in that time and place. God could have said, “Name him ‘Only Begotten’ or ‘Christ,’” but there were two reasons God chose the name Jesus. The first is the meaning of the name, “Joshua” in Hebrew (or Yehoshua), which means “Yahweh Saves.” In other words, God’s name is embedded in the name “Jesus,” that Jesus saves. The other reason this name is so appropriate is precisely because it’s so common. Jesus is fully God and fully human, so to give him a common human name is more than appropriate; it’s the point. He’s one of us.

Jesus grew up as an ordinary boy in Nazareth. It was not God’s design for his identity to be revealed when he was playing with toddlers or sitting in the synagogue on a Sabbath or delivering furniture from his father’s carpentry shop. Jesus is the name by which, then and now, we relate to him. It’s his “Bob,” the name by which my friends know me. If you call me “Rev. Thompson,” or “Dr. Robert,” I’ll know we’re not very well connected. Bob is my friendly name. Jesus is *his* friendly name.

But it's so much more. It's the name by which we are saved. It's the name above all names. It's the name we breathe in prayer. It's the name that summarizes the essence of the Gospel of Jesus. I went looking for songs about Jesus, and asked my Facebook friends to help me out. Here are 50 of them, including some of the lyrics.

1. 1661 – Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring (Martin Janus)

*Jesu, joy of man's desiring
Holy wisdom, love most bright
Drawn by Thee, our souls aspiring
Soar to uncreated light*

2. 1740 – Jesus, Lover of My Soul (Charles Wesley)

*Jesus, lover of my soul,
Let me to Thy bosom fly,
While the nearer waters roll,
While the tempest still is high.*

3. 1757 – Come, thou Fount of Every Blessing (Robert Robinson)
4. 1776 – Jesus Makes My heart Rejoice (Henrietta Louise van Hayn)
5. 1779 – All hail the power of Jesus' name (William Perronet)

*All hail the pow'r of Jesus' Name!
Let angels prostrate fall;
Bring forth the royal diadem,
And crown Him Lord of all!*

6. 1849 – Jesus, the Very Thought of Thee (Edward Caswall, from Bernard of Clairvaux)

*Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills the breast;
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest.*

7. 1855 – There Is a Name I Love to Hear (Frederick Whitfield)
8. 1855 – What a Friend We Have in Jesus (Joseph Scriven)
9. 1858 – Jesus, thou joy of loving hearts (Ray Palmer, from Bernard of Clairvaux)
10. 1860 – Jesus Loves Me This I Know (William Bradbury)
11. 1864 – My Jesus I Love Thee (William Featherstone)
12. 1865 – Jesus Paid it All (Elvina Hall)
13. 1868 – Beneath the Cross of Jesus (Elizabeth Clephane)
14. 1869 – Jesus, Keep Me Near the Cross (Fanny Crosby)
15. 1873 – Fairest Lord Jesus (Joseph Seiss, from German Jesuits)

*Fairest Lord Jesus, ruler of all nature
O thou of God and man the Son
Thee will I cherish, Thee will I honor
Thou, my soul's glory, joy, and crown*

- 16. 1876 – Nothing But the Blood of Jesus (Robert Lowry)
- 17. 1880 – Tell Me the Story of Jesus (Fanny Crosby)
- 18. 1882 – 'Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus (Louisa Stead)

*Jesus, Jesus, how I trust Him!
How I've proved Him o'er and o'er
Jesus, Jesus, precious Jesus!
Oh, for grace to trust Him more!*

- 19. 1882 – We Have Heard the Joyful Sound (Priscilla Owens)
- 20. 1885 – Tell Me the Stories of Jesus (William Parker)
- 21. 1887 – More About Jesus (Eliza Hewitt)
- 22. 1890 – Let Me Closer to Thee, Lord Jesus (Llanthony Abbey)

*Let me come closer to Thee, Lord Jesus,
Oh, closer day by day;
Let me lean harder on Thee, Lord Jesus,
Yes, harder, all the way.*

- 23. 1904 – Jesus Is All the World to Me (Will Thompson)

*Jesus is all the world to me,
My life, my joy, my all;
He is my strength from day to day,
Without Him I would fall.*

- 24. 1910 – Jesus, What a Friend for Sinners (Wilbur Chapman)
- 25. 1916 – I Know of a Name (Jean Perry)
- 26. 1918 – Wonderful Grace of Jesus (Harold Lillenas)
- 27. 1922 – Turn Your Eyes Upon Jesus (Helen Lemmel)
- 28. 1925 – Jesus is the Sweetest Name I Know (Lela Long)

*Jesus is the sweetest name I know,
And He's just the same as His lovely name,
That's the reason why that I love Him so;
For Jesus is the sweetest name I know.*

- 29. 1927 – Jesus Loves the Little Children (Herbert Woolston)
- 30. 1939 – Victory in Jesus (E. M. Bartlett)
- 31. 1952 – What a Day that Will Be (Jim Hill)

32. 1959 – His Name is Wonderful (Audrey Wieir)
33. 1970 – There's just something about that name (Gaithers)

*Jesus, Jesus, Jesus; there's just something about that name.
Master, Savior, Jesus, like the fragrance after the rain;
Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, let all Heaven and earth proclaim
Kings and kingdoms will all pass away,
But there's something about that name.*

34. 1970 – Because He Lives (Gaithers)
35. 1974 – Jesus, Name Above All Names (Naida Hearn)

*Jesus, name above all names
Beautiful Saviour, Glorious Lord
Emmanuel, God is with us
Blessed Redeemer, Living Word*

36. 1979 – Jesus is Beyond Imagination (Christine Wyrzten)
37. 1981 – All Hail, King Jesus! All Hail, Emmanuel! (Dave Moody)
38. 1981 – Jesus, Remember Me (Jacques Berthier)
39. 1987 – Shine, Jesus, Shine (Graham Kendrick)

*Shine, Jesus, shine
Fill this land with the Father's glory
Blaze, Spirit, blaze
Set our hearts on fire*

40. 1992 – Jesus is Still Alright (DC Talk)
41. 1993 – Shout to the Lord (Hillsong Worship)
42. 2003 – I've Just Seen Jesus (Gaithers)
43. 2004 – Untitled Hymn, Come to Jesus (Chris Rice)

*Weak and wounded sinner
Lost and left to die
O, raise your head, for love is passing by
Come to Jesus
Come to Jesus
Come to Jesus and live!*

44. 2005 – Jesus, Take the Wheel (Brett James et. al.)

*Jesus, take the wheel
Take it from my hands
'Cause I can't do this on my own
I'm letting go*

*So give me one more chance
And save me from this road I'm on
Jesus, take the wheel*

- 45. 2007 – Jesus in Me (Paul Cummings)
- 46. 2008 – Sets and Rises (Paul Cummings)

*Jesus my Savior, shine into this darkness, into this darkness
You're my hope, my Redeemer, my hope, my redeemer, and
My sun sets and rises, sun sets and rises in you*

- 47. 2008 – Jesus is a Friend of Mine (Sonseed)
- 48. 2016 – There is a Name (Covenant Worship)
- 49. 2017 – Jesus (Chris Tomlin)
- 50. 2017 – What a Beautiful Name (Hillsong)

*What a beautiful Name it is
Nothing compares to this
What a beautiful Name it is
The Name of Jesus*

There was a wedding here in the sanctuary last night, and something happened that's never happened in a wedding I officiated. The groom fainted. He had written that his bride was "my death row meal," meaning she was the most scrumptious, delightful joy he could imagine if he were at the end of his life. I'm sure there is more than one reason his knees went limp, but I'm convinced one of them was the overwhelming wonder that this woman was marrying him. I saw his face flush with anticipation and his eyes fill with tears as he watched her walk down the aisle. A few minutes later, he slumped to the floor.

I'm not suggesting fainting in church, but I do want to have that same sense of wonder when I remember that the Incomparable One, the only begotten Son of God, who is the promised Christ, is Jesus to me – my Savior and my friend. Amen.