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TRUE CHRISTIANITY

1 John 1:1-4

By

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November 20, 2005
1 John Lesson 2

True Christianity 1 John 1:1-4

If you were to go into the streets and ask, “What is Christianity?” you’d probably get a wide range of answers. Some might say that it is a system of thought or morality. Others might call it a religious organization. Those who are bitter against the church may say that it’s an evil system of repression. Even if you were to limit your question to those who make a claim to be some sort of Christian, I’d guess that you would get a wide range of answers.

The same would be true if you asked, “Who do you think Jesus Christ is?” Many would say that He was a great religious teacher or a good man. Some may identify Him as the founder of Christianity. Some may even say, correctly, that He is the Son of God, but they would be hard pressed to explain what that means.

It’s no accident that there is such confusion on the essence of true Christianity and the person of Jesus Christ. These are foundational issues. If you have a shaky foundation, it does not matter if the rest of the building is impressive—you’ve got a shaky building! And so Satan has tried to confuse people about true Christianity.

He’s been at it for centuries. Before the first century church was sixty years old, Satan had moved in to cause confusion. As we saw last week, many false teachers had arisen in the churches of Asia Minor, where the aged apostle John labored. They had left the churches and taken followers with them (1 John 2:19). They claimed to have the real truth about Christ and Christianity. So the apostle John wrote to his little children in the faith, to make sure that they were clear on the essence of true Christianity. He wanted them to spot and resist error and to grow in true fellowship with Jesus Christ.

The enemy is no less active today in stirring up such confusion. There are the cults, of course, with their blatant deviations from the faith. But, also, there are many errors that keep worming their way into Christian circles. Currently, the “new perspective on Paul” seeks to redefine the doctrine of justification by faith alone.

The unity movement sets aside the gospel for the sake of unity between Roman Catholics and Protestants. "Open Theism" challenges God's omniscience and absolute sovereignty. Arminianism in effect makes man sovereign over God in the matter of salvation. "Christian" psychology has introduced many errors, including the concept of self-esteem. The list could go on!

John begins his letter by getting right down to business. Except for Hebrews, John's letters are the only New Testament epistles that begin without an opening salutation. Instead, John begins with a section that is similar to the prologue of his Gospel. Here he begins to counter the false teachers. He shows that...

True Christianity is Jesus Christ—revealed, experienced,
and proclaimed with joy.

Christianity is not essentially a system of thought. Rather, it is a person—Jesus Christ—who was historically validated, personally experienced, and authoritatively proclaimed by the apostles. That is the foundation that John lays in these opening verses.

1. True Christianity is Jesus Christ revealed.

The main foundation of Christianity is not the speculations of men about God, but rather that God has chosen to reveal Himself to us. The prime way that He did that is in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the eternal God in human flesh. The only way that we can come to God or know Him is through Jesus Christ. As Jesus said (John 14:6), "I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me." Or, again Jesus said (John 17:3), "This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent."

A. The revelation of Jesus Christ is historically validated.

John begins (1:1) by listing five ways that the revelation of Jesus Christ is historically validated. After the first, the last four are in a progression from the least (heard) to the most definite (touched).

(1) Jesus Christ is validated by the historic message about Him.

Conservative scholars are divided over the interpretation of the first phrase, "what was from the beginning." Some note the parallel with John 1:1, "In the beginning was the Word, and the

Word was with God, and the Word was God." This parallels Genesis 1:1, "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." So they interpret this as a reference to the eternity of the Son of God. They argue that this is supported by the phrase in 1 John 1:2, "was with the Father," and by 2:13, 14, which refers to Jesus as existing "from the beginning." (John Stott argues for this, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], pp. 58-59.)

Others, however, while not denying the eternity of the Son, argue that that is not John's meaning here. They would argue that instead the phrase means what it later means in 1 John 2:7, 2:24, and 3:11, namely, the beginning of the gospel. They point out that John's emphasis here, to counter the recent message of the false teachers, is that the apostolic message has not changed. It is the same message that has been proclaimed from the earliest days of the gospel. Also, the emphasis of the rest of verse 1 is on Christ's humanity. So John's point would be that his message is not the new message of the Gnostics. Rather, it is the old message, which has been proclaimed from the earliest days of Christ's ministry. It is the same message that his readers had heard and believed from the beginning of their Christian experience. (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* [Eerdmans], p. 35; A. W. Pink, *Exposition of 1 John* [Associated Publishers & Authors], pp. 7-8; and Robert Law, *The Tests of Life* [Baker], p. 369, argue for this view.)

It is difficult to decide between these two views, but I lean toward the second view, in that John here seems to be appealing to his apostolic authority, and the fact that he had been with Jesus from the beginning of His earthly ministry. Thus the records of the four Gospels bear witness to the person of Jesus Christ.

(2) Jesus Christ is validated by His teaching.

"What we have heard" (1:1). John and the other apostles (the "we" of 1:1-4) had heard the very words of Jesus, and what amazing words they were! Even His enemies testified (John 7:46), "Never has a man spoken the way this man speaks." How true! If you are trying to bear witness to someone who has never read the Gospels, direct him to do that. The words of Jesus bear witness of who He is.

(3) Jesus Christ is validated by His life and miracles.

“What we have seen with our eyes.” The addition of the phrase, “with our eyes,” shows that John is not talking about a mystical “vision” of Christ, but of actually watching Jesus as He lived before them. The apostles saw Jesus turn the water into wine, feed the 5,000, walk on water, heal the multitudes, and raise the dead. The 35 miracles recorded in the four gospels are only a fraction of those that the apostles witnessed. John (21:25) ends his gospel by stating that if all the things that Jesus did were written in detail, the whole world couldn’t contain the books. Jesus’ sinless life and the powerful miracles He performed validate that He is the unique Son of God.

(4) Jesus Christ is validated by the glory of His person.

“What we have looked at.” This is not just a repetition of “what we have seen with our eyes,” but a step further. The Greek verb means, “careful and deliberate vision which interprets its object” (G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* [Scribner’s], p. 203). We derive our English word “theater” from it. It is the word that John (1:14) uses in his gospel, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.” John was especially referring to his experience on the Mount of Transfiguration, when he and Peter and James saw Jesus’ glory unveiled. Peter refers to that event when he states (2 Pet. 1:16), “For we did not follow cleverly devised tales when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we were eyewitnesses of His majesty.”

(5) Jesus Christ is validated by His bodily resurrection.

What we have ... “touched with our hands.” This is the same word that Jesus used after His resurrection, when He appeared to the disciples. He said (Luke 24:39), “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have” (see also, John 20:27).

So John is saying that Jesus Christ was revealed and that He was historically validated by the apostles in all of these objective ways, both before and after the resurrection. But, also, ...

B. The revelation of Jesus Christ is spiritually manifested.

John states (1:1) that he is writing “concerning the Word of Life,” and then adds (1:2), “and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.” In verse 1, the emphasis is on the humanity of Jesus Christ as He came in the flesh. In verse 2, John’s focus shifts to Jesus Christ as the one who both embodies and imparts eternal life. By stating that this Eternal Life (it should be capitalized) was “with the Father,” he uses the same preposition as in John 1:1, “the Word was with God.” But there the focus is on Jesus as *the Word*. Here the emphasis is on Jesus as *the Life*. This has two important implications:

- (1) The message about Jesus Christ is not only about knowledge—it’s also about life.

The false teachers emphasized secret knowledge. While proper knowledge is vital—you cannot believe the gospel without knowing certain facts—there is more. The gospel is about dead sinners being raised to new life. Nicodemus was a teacher of the Jews (he had knowledge), but before he met with Jesus, he did not understand that he needed new life through the new birth (John 3:1-16). The apostle Paul told the Ephesians that they were dead in their sins (Eph. 2:1-3). Then he adds the wonderful words (2:4-5), “But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ....”

So the gospel is not just a matter of knowing and assenting to the facts about Jesus Christ, although it includes that. It’s also a matter of Christ raising you from spiritual death to life.

- (2) The message about Jesus Christ must be revealed to us so that we can see Christ as our life.

John states (1:2), “the life was manifested,” and then repeats that this eternal life “was manifested to us” (the apostles). In other words, the apostles not only had Jesus Christ revealed to them in an objective, historical way; but also, He was manifested to them in a spiritual way as “the life, the eternal one” (literal translation of the Greek). God opened their eyes to see that the man, Jesus, was not just a godly man or a great teacher. It was revealed to them that He is “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16-17).

Why didn't the multitudes that heard the same teaching and saw the same miracles as the apostles also see and believe in Christ as the life-giving Savior? Jesus explained (Luke 10:21) that the Father had hidden these things from the wise and revealed them to infants (see also, Matt. 13:10-17). Then (10:22) He added, "All things have been handed over to Me by My Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, and who the Father is except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him." In a similar vein, Paul explained (2 Cor. 4:4), "... the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelieving so that they might not see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." Unless God shines into our hearts to give sight (2 Cor. 4:6), we cannot and will not see the truth about who Jesus Christ really is. At its core, true Christianity is Jesus Christ revealed.

2. True Christianity is Jesus Christ experienced.

Our experience of Jesus Christ must be based on the biblical revelation of Him. It is both personal and corporate. The personal aspect is evident in the repetition of "we" and "our" in these verses. The apostles knew Christ individually, but also they shared together in the experience. And the experience was progressive, or growing. We can see this here in three ways (I need to be brief now, but I hope to come back to this next week):

A. The experience of Jesus Christ begins with reliable information about Him (1:1).

This is the historical validation that we've already seen. Christianity is not a mystical experience or someone's subjective ideas about God. Rather, it is an experience rooted in history. God sent His Son at a point in history, in fulfillment of promises that He had made in earlier history. Our experience must be biblically based.

B. The information leads to eternal life (1:2).

This is the spiritual manifestation of Jesus Christ. At some point in discovering the historical facts, God opens a person's eyes to see who Jesus truly is. He sees that Jesus is Life, eternal life (John 14:6). As John later states (1 John 5:20), "And we know that the Son of God has come, and has given us understanding so that we may know Him who is true; and we are in Him who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life."

- C. The eternal life leads to deepening fellowship with God and with other believers (1:3).

“Fellowship” means, literally, to share in common. The fellowship that we share when we come to know Jesus Christ as our life is two-dimensional: it is with God and with one another. John begins on the human plane, stating that he is proclaiming these truths about Jesus Christ “so that you too may have fellowship with us” (the apostolic circle). Then he adds, “and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” John Stott (*ibid.*, pp. 63-64) explains, “John does not here mention the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, which is a characteristic expression in the Pauline Epistles (2 Cor. 13:14; Phil. 2:1), no doubt because the false teachers against whom he is writing make him concentrate on the Son, whom their heresy dishonored, and the Father whom they thereby forfeited.”

I’ll say more about this fellowship next time, but for now let me say that true Christianity is an experience rooted in revelation and realized in relationship—with God and with other believers. This two-dimensional fellowship should always be deepening in both directions. If you’ve been a Christian for a while, you should know and enjoy fellowship with God better than before. And, you should be deepening your relationships with God’s people. This is to say that unless you are in solitary confinement, you cannot be a growing Christian in isolation from other Christians. True Christianity is an experience of fellowship with God and with His people.

- 3. True Christianity is Jesus Christ proclaimed.

The Gnostics claimed that the truth about Christ was a deep mystery or secret, known only by the few. They were deliberately exclusive. But John counters their error by showing that true Christianity is not exclusive and hidden. Rather, it is a message that by its very nature must be proclaimed. He uses three words to describe how the apostles communicated the gospel:

- A. We proclaim Jesus Christ on the authority of eyewitness testimony (“testify”).

“Testify” is a legal term meaning, “to bear witness.” When you testify in court, you swear to tell the truth about what you saw or heard. John Stott (p. 61) calls this “the authority of experience.”

The apostles spoke the truth about what they had seen and heard during their time with Jesus.

- B. We proclaim Jesus Christ on the authority of commission (“proclaim”).

This word means to report or announce as a messenger. Stott calls it “the authority of commission,” in that it implies that Jesus Christ appointed the apostles to proclaim the good news about His life, teaching, death, and resurrection. They did not launch the church because they were a bunch of religious entrepreneurs or franchisers, promoting their business. They were under orders from Jesus Christ and they weren’t free to change the message to fit the customers. They had to proclaim the message that the King had commanded them. That message hasn’t changed!

- C. We proclaim Jesus Christ on the authority of written revelation (“write”).

John (and some of the other apostles) wrote under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit the words that God wanted us to receive. Through these writings (our New Testament), we can enter into the same fellowship with God that the apostles enjoyed!

If John and the other apostles had not proclaimed the message, we wouldn’t know Christ today. The Great Commission that Jesus gave to them applies to us, also. If we don’t proclaim to others the authoritative message of the King, how will they know and believe (see Rom. 10:14-15)? God’s method of imparting eternal life to those who are dead in their sins is through the proclamation of the word of life, the gospel. If you’re not proclaiming God’s revelation about Jesus Christ by your life and words, you’re not experiencing the fullness of true Christianity. One final note:

- 4. True Christianity is great joy in Jesus Christ.

John says that he writes these things “so that our joy may be made complete.” Some later manuscripts change “our” to “your,” and certainly that is true. But the original reading was probably “our” joy, referring to the joy of the apostolic circle that knew Christ firsthand. John was by this point the only surviving apostle. But, how was his joy made complete in writing these things? In the sense of 3 John 4, “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth” (see also, 2 John 4). If John’s little

children would read these letters and not be carried away by the false teachers, but continue in the truth, he was a happy man.

You may think that joy in the Lord is a nice extra, but not essential. But as John Piper often points out, we cannot glorify God properly unless we enjoy Him thoroughly. A. W. Pink (*ibid.*, p. 28) observed, “Now this joy is not to be regarded as a luxury, but rather as a spiritual necessity. We are obligated to be glad in God.” He goes on to cite several Scriptures that command us to be glad and rejoice in the Lord. Then he points out that we will not glorify God apart from such genuine joy in Him. Our aim in proclaiming the gospel to others should be that they, too, would come to share our joy in Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

James Boice sums up (*The Epistles of John* [Zondervan], p. 30),

This then is the way in which the gospel has come to us and must be passed on. The apostles bore witness to what they had seen and heard of Jesus, proclaimed it authoritatively on His commission, and finally preserved it in the writings which have since become our New Testament. Today believers are to take their writings and, having through them entered into the experience of the apostles, proclaim the Christ of the apostles to the world.

Many people believe in a Jesus of their own imagination and have an emotional experience that they call being born again. But when their problems are not all magically solved, or they go through difficult trials, they conclude that “Jesus didn’t work,” and they go back to the world. The problem is, they didn’t believe in the Jesus revealed by the apostles in the New Testament. Their experience was not that of true fellowship with God and with others who know God. And so any witness about their supposed conversion is lost when they abandon the faith. It’s likely that they never experienced true Christianity.

True Christianity is essentially Jesus Christ—revealed in Scripture, experienced in new life and fellowship, and proclaimed with joy. Make sure that you’ve got the real deal!

Application Questions

1. Why is it important to base our faith in Jesus on the biblical revelation of Him? What current errors violate this?
2. Many Muslims today are coming to Christ through dreams and visions. How does this fit with the biblical revelation of Christ?
3. What is the difference between an academic knowledge of Christ and knowing Him as “the Life”? Do they overlap?
4. Should a joyless Christian witness? How would you counsel such a person to recover his joy?

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