

That You May Know

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

The Word Of Life
September 13th, 2020
1 John 1:1-4
Rev. Paul Carter

Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bibles with you and that you are able to open them now to 1 John 1:1. We are starting something new today. I thought it would be good for us to get back into our default routine of working through a whole book of the Bible and given some of what is going on in the world – and in the church – 1 John seemed like a very useful place for us to park ourselves for the next several Sundays.

This letter, as the name implies, was written by the Apostle John – the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. He wrote these three little letters at the end of your New Testament very near to the end of his life. John was the last living Apostle when he wrote these letters. He lived a very long life and he was the only disciple of the 12 to die in his own bed. He was tortured and imprisoned at various stages of his life, but at the end he was free and he was ministering to a cluster of churches in Asia Minor – the region that is part of modern-day Turkey.

The church father Jerome tells a story about the old Apostle in his latter days. Apparently near the end of his life his disciples would carry him on a litter around to his various churches and he would be taken to the centre of the gathering and he would summon his strength and deliver his characteristic charge. He would hold up one shaking finger and he would say: “Little children, love one another.”¹

¹As told by David Jackman in *The Message of John's Letters*, ed. John R. W. Stott, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 11.

That was about all he could muster at the end – but to those who knew him, those words spoke volumes.

John's basic philosophy of ministry was that GOOD DOCTRINE would lead to GOOD BEHAVIOR which would lead to GOOD COMMUNITY. So "love one another" was basically the last point in every Johannine sermon. And you can see that same 1-2-3 progression in almost every chapter of this letter.

Scholars tell us that there really is no sustained argument in 1 John – like there is in most of Paul's letters. This is a letter filled with simple truths and simple applications. I love how David Jackman puts it, he says:

"John does not attempt a detailed analysis or critique of error; he has no need to do so. He proclaims the truth in the characteristic apostolic confidence that where the truth is declared and believed, error will be undermined and will ultimately collapse."²

So that's John's approach – now of course it complicates things for the preacher because we have to try and backwards engineer what was going on behind the scenes so as to explain things to the contemporary reader – and there was a lot going on, in the culture and in these churches.

This is a circular letter – you will notice that it does not begin with the normal beginning that a personal or direct letter would normally have. It doesn't say: "I John, an apostle of Jesus Christ to the churches in Asia Minor" – when Apostles wrote CIRCULAR LETTERS – meaning letters that they wanted delivered to multiple churches – they left that out. You see the same thing with the Epistle to the Hebrews. We only know who this letter was for because we know from church history where John was for the latter part of his life. John became the Bishop of the churches in Asia Minor. We believe that this letter was sent to the same churches John wrote to from his imprisonment on the Island of Patmos. There were 7 churches listed with Ephesus being the capital of that region.

And thankfully, we know a fair bit about what was going on in that region – some of that information comes from history and some of it comes from the Bible itself.

²David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 17.

These churches had all been founded, either directly or indirectly by the Apostle Paul. You remember that Paul set up shop in Ephesus on his third missionary journey. He stayed in Ephesus for more than 2 years - that was the longest that Paul stayed anywhere in his entire missionary career. He stayed there because the Lord was blessing the work. Acts 19:10 says:

This continued for two years, so that all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks. (Acts 19:10 ESV)

So the whole region came under the sound of the Gospel because Ephesus was the hub city – the market town. People came into the city and they heard the Gospel and then they went back to the surrounding towns and they established churches – it was an amazing time!

But then – a WAVE of false teaching went through the entire region and threatened to spoil all the good work that had been done. So Paul sent Timothy to try and silence these false teachers. He says in 1 Timothy 1:3:

As I urged you when I was going to Macedonia, remain at Ephesus so that you may charge certain persons not to teach any different doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3 ESV)

Apparently, however, it didn't work, this false teaching grew and grew and grew. So much so that Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:15:

You are aware that all who are in Asia turned away from me, among whom are Phygelus and Hermogenes. (2 Timothy 1:15 ESV)

So it appeared that the entire work had been spoiled. This whole region was like that part of the field in the parable of the soils – the one where the seed sprung up quickly and looked really promising, but then because there was no root, the whole thing withered and spoiled under the heat of the sun.

That's what happened.

But then, in the providence of God there was this huge influx of healthy, orthodox believers. In the late AD 60's – after Paul was dead – after he had been executed by Nero – a huge WAVE of Jewish Christians who had been living in Jerusalem – fled that city in advance of the Roman army and took up residence in Ephesus. F.F. Bruce says:

“The sixties of the first century, however, saw a welcome revitalizing of the apostolic Christianity in proconsular Asia. This was due to the immigration of a number of Christians from Palestine shortly before the outbreak of the Jewish War in AD 66.”³

Now – this is not a sermon on immigration – but let's just PAUSE here and notice that sometimes immigration is used by God to revitalize a DEAD CHURCH. And I'll tell you this, sometimes when I look at the sad state of the evangelical church in North America I am tempted to think that the only thing that can save us now would be a MASSIVE influx of Christians from Africa and Asia. So be careful what you allow yourself to think about immigration. They might be coming for our jobs, but in the process, they might also save our souls – but that's a message for another day.

The point is, immigration is what this church needed – and by the grace of God, that is exactly what they got. They got a bunch of immigrants who really knew Jesus – one of whom was the Apostle John. He set up shop in this broken down, semi-apostate church and by the grace of God – he brought it back to life.

Now here at the end of his life, apparently, there is need for a further wave of reformation. The heretics have regrouped and reorganized and there has been some kind of formal schism. We're going to hear about that in chapter 2. Now you have to remember that this was back before denominations. This was back when there was just Christianity. All the churches in this region had drunk from the same original well – they were all the grandchildren, as it were, of the Apostle Paul's preaching in the hub city of Ephesus. So they were Pauline Christians for lack of a better term.

But then, under pressure from the culture a couple of core doctrines had come under attack. Roman philosophy and religion typically made a sharp distinction between spirit and matter.

³ F.F. Bruce, *The Gospels & Epistles Of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 14.

Spirit was GOOD and NOBLE and matter was low and base. Most Roman religions pictured the afterlife as a RELEASE from the body. That's why they burned bodies instead of burying them. You didn't want your body back – your body was gross. It was earthbound. It was frail and fading. You wanted to be SPIRIT. You wanted to be high and above the mess of stinking humanity. And so 3 Christian doctrines in particular came under assault. The doctrine of the incarnation, the doctrine of the atonement and the doctrine of the resurrection. None of these made any sense to the Roman mind. Historian Ramsay MacMullen says for example, about the resurrection that:

“resurrection in the flesh appeared a startling, distasteful idea, at odds with everything that passed for wisdom among the educated.”⁴

So all the fleshy and physical parts of the Gospel started getting edited out. Christianity became a mystical experience, less interested in sin, less interested in a bloody cross, less interested in the renewal of all creation and more interested in higher knowledge, higher experience and deeper understanding.

That was the NEXT LEVEL Christianity being preached by these false teachers. And so now in Asia Minor you had TWO CHRISTIANITIES – you had TWO CHURCHES!! TWO TOTALLY DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE GOSPEL – and these people are understandably shaken and confused.

So they turn to the Apostle John – the one guy who ought to know. The last living Apostle of Jesus. And they ask him:

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO IS TELLING THE TRUTH?

HOW DO WE KNOW WHO IS RIGHT?

HOW DO WE KNOW IF WE ARE THE REAL CHRISTIANS – OR THEY ARE?

And he writes this letter in response.

⁴ Ramsay MacMullen as cited by Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 800.

In chapter 1 he begins at the very beginning. He wants them to understand that there is only one real Gospel; there is only one word of life. So hear now the Word of the Lord beginning at verse 1.

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. (1 John 1:1–4 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

John says 5 things here about the real Gospel.

The Real Gospel

The first thing he says is that:

1. The real Gospel is the original Gospel

His Gospel is that which was from the beginning. Now of course if you are a Bible reader then you probably hear there an echo of two things. You probably here an echo of Genesis 1:1:

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth. (Genesis 1:1 ESV)

And you probably hear an echo of John 1:1. The Apostle John began his Gospel this way as a well, he said:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (John 1:1 ESV)

So John is saying that the Gospel cannot be edited by Roman pagans living in first century Asia Minor. The Gospel – this word of life – is **WOVEN INTO THE VERY FABRIC OF CREATION**. The Gospel was in the mind of God before he created a single human being.

When God created human beings and gave them freedom but allowed them to be tempted he knew that he would fall. He knew that he would have to redeem them. He knew the cost before creating. But he determined to pay it – that's why we used to sing about the Lamb of God **SLAIN** before the foundation of the world – do you remember that?

These people had been taught that too.

Paul had written to them and told them that everything that had happened was according to **AN ETERNAL PLAN**. He said in Ephesians 3:11:

This was according to the eternal purpose that he has realized in Christ Jesus our Lord (Ephesians 3:11 ESV)

The Gospel is an **OLD PLAN**. It is an eternal plan. So it cannot be edited or updated according to the whims of the cultural moment.

These people needed to hear that – and we need to hear that too, don't we?

Every cultural moment despises something about the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Their cultural moment had no time for the Word of God become **FLESH**. They had no time for a bloody cross and no time for an empty tomb. So they pushed for changes.

Our culture is pushing for changes too. They have no time for sexual purity, no time for marriage, no time for biological gender. No time for exclusive claims about Christ.

But that doesn't mean that they get to update the Gospel.

There is only Gospel. It is the Gospel that **WAS FROM THE BEGINNING**.

That's the first thing John says. The second thing he says is that:

2. The real Gospel is the Apostolic Gospel

Look at verse 1 again. He says the real Gospel is:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands (1 John 1:1 ESV)

The real Gospel is the Gospel preached to you by the eyewitnesses to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

I was there, John says.

I was standing at the cross when Jesus died. He said to me:

“Behold, your mother!” (John 19:27 ESV)

He entrusted his mother to me SECONDS before he breathed his last breath on this earth.

I was there!

I saw him die.

And I saw him rise from the dead.

I was inside the empty tomb.

I was in the locked room when Jesus appeared in our midst and said:

“Peace be with you.”²⁰ When he had said this, he showed them his hands and his side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. (John 20:19–20 ESV)

That's me, John says. I was glad. Because I had doubts too. I get that. But I'm telling you, I saw Jesus in the FLESH. I saw him eat and drink. I saw his hands and his sides – and I'm telling you that Jesus rose from the dead.

That's the real Gospel. It is the Gospel preached to you by those who saw and heard.

Thirdly, he says:

3. The real Gospel is Jesus

Look again at verse 1 and verse 2, particularly the transition from verse 1 to verse 2. He says:

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—² **the life was made manifest**, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, **which was with the Father and was made manifest to us**” (1 John 1:1–2 ESV)

So is John talking about A MESSAGE? Or is John talking about a PERSON? It looks like John is talking about both. Colin Kruse for example says here:

“It is clear from the foregoing that when the author says, we proclaim concerning the Word of life, he has in mind something much more than a spoken message. He proclaims the Word of life which he has heard, seen, and touched. As will become clear in what follows, he proclaims a message that has been embodied in a person — the person of Jesus Christ.”⁵

David Jackman says the same thing in far fewer words. He just says:

“Christ *is* the gospel. The person and the message must be held together.”⁶

You see these false teachers liked THE IDEAS of Jesus, they liked the TEACHING of Jesus but they didn't like the PERSON of Jesus. They didn't like that he was so human. He was human, he

⁵Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 53.

⁶David Jackman, *The Message of John's Letters*, ed. John R. W. Stott, *The Bible Speaks Today*. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 22.

was Jewish human, he was very earthy. He ate fish. He slept. He bled. He died – all very ungodlike. All very unspiritual.

So they wanted to keep the ideas – and get rid of the person. But John says: the person and the ideas go together. Jesus the person shows us how Christian theology ought to be lived out. Jesus shows us truth and life. Jesus shows us strength and humility. Jesus shows us faith and works.

Jesus IS THE GOSPEL.

The Gospel is not a set of ideas about Jesus. The Gospel is not an equation that explains Jesus.

The Gospel is Jesus.

So yes – let's have orthodox ideas about Jesus – but let's also pay attention to the example of Jesus.

Christianity is a WAY. It is the Jesus WAY and any attempt to move past that – any attempt to move beyond the HUMAN, LIVED reality of Jesus – is not the Gospel. It is not the Word of LIFE.

The fourth thing he says here is that:

4. There is no fellowship with God apart from the real Gospel

Look at verse 3:

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, **so that** you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3 ESV)

John says here that his whole motivation in writing this letter is to keep them in the real Gospel, because if they drift away from that, then they drift out of fellowship with the Apostles, with the Father and with Christ.

That's an incredible claim.

John basically says – that there is a connection between the Father, Christ and the Apostles – and you either have fellowship with all three or you have fellowship with none. You can't fellowship with God without having fellowship with Jesus, and you can't have fellowship with Jesus without in some sense being in fellowship with the Apostles.

Now where in the world did John get that?

He got it from Jesus. Jesus said to his Apostles:

“Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me.” (Matthew 10:40 ESV)

Jesus said this sort of thing to this select group on multiple occasions. At the Last Supper when Jesus washed the disciples' feet John records him as saying once again:

“Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever receives the one I send receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me.” (John 13:20 ESV)

You see that connection?

If you don't receive the Apostles as having been sent and commissioned by Jesus then you don't receive Jesus. There is no such thing as a direct relationship with Jesus that by-passes the testimony and witness and authority of the Apostles.

And think about that – how could there be?

Let me ask you a question: what would you know about Jesus if not for the Apostles? Who wrote the Red Letters in your Bible?

The Apostles.

Jesus didn't write the Gospels. He commissioned the Apostles. He gave them the Holy Spirit and a unique anointing and authority.

That's why Paul said TO THESE EPHESIANS that the church – the real church is the one:

“built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Ephesians 2:20 ESV)

You can't get to Jesus – that stone that holds it all together – you can't get to Jesus APART from the witness of the Old Testament prophets and the New Testament Apostles. If you try to bypass that – you are a mystic. And mystics are worshipping another Jesus. A false Jesus. An angel of darkness in garments of light.

If you aren't reading the prophets and the Apostles then you aren't talking to Jesus and you have no fellowship with God.

That's what he's saying.

The fifth and final thing we see him saying here is that:

5. There is no joy for anyone outside of the real Gospel

Look at verse 4:

“And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.” (1 John 1:4 ESV)

Now if you have an old KJV of the Bible then it will say:

“And these things write we unto you, that **your** joy may be full.” (1 John 1:4 KJV)

There were some older manuscripts that had YOUR JOY instead of OUR JOY but the oldest and the majority favour the translation you have there in the ESV. But the confusion is

understandable. Was John writing this so that HE could be joyful or so that THEY could be joyful?

The Apostle Paul had said that persevering in the real Gospel is what leads to joy for people and for churches – he said that in 2 Corinthians 1:24. He said:

“we work with you for your joy, for you stand firm in your faith.” (2 Corinthians 1:24 ESV)

I want you to be happy, Paul says, I want you to have joy, so I work very hard to keep my churches in the faith.

So that COULD BE what John is saying here.

But elsewhere in his letters John speaks about his own joy. The joy of a spiritual father whose children have followed him in the faith. In 2 John, writing to a particular church in this region – we don't know which one, but he refers to the church as “the elect lady” and he says:

I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. (2 John 1:4 ESV)

I hear you are doing very well, and that makes me happy.

John was a spiritual parent and he rejoiced to see his children and grandchildren walking in the faith. He said in 3 John 1:4:

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. (3 John 1:4 ESV)

Can you feel that? Anybody here can say amen to that? And the flip side too – anybody here know the pain and the hurt in your father heart or your mother heart when your children are not walking in the truth?

So I have no problem believing in the majority translation here. I think John is saying that if you want to make daddy happy, walk in the truth. I say that to my kids on a regular basis.

But I believe what the Apostle Paul said too – I believe that walking in the real Gospel will make everyone happy – because there is no LASTING JOY apart from the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

There is no good for you out there in the dark. Out there is chaos, conflict and confusion. But here in the light there is forgiveness, there is power, there is community – and there is Jesus.

So come darkness, come chaos, come trial, tribulation and storm. WE WILL NOT FEAR. We will not move. Because Jesus is here – and he is enough. Thanks be to God! Let's pray together.