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1 John 1:1-4

First Message

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WHAT IS CHRISTIANITY?

SERIES: LIVING CONFIDENTLY IN THE LIGHT

I can hardly believe that the holiday season is upon us! I love Thanksgiving. Out of all of the holidays, this is one of my favorites because it reminds me to slow down and focus on the things that really matter: family, friends, football. There is an immense need in our world for simplifying our lives. High-tech times lead to high-stress tension. I have especially been thinking about simplifying my life these past few weeks because of the birth of our third child, Timothy Michael. There is nothing like a newborn to remind us of what is important.

Some time ago, a member of our body mailed me an article by Robert Fulghum entitled "All I Ever Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten" which caused me to remember to simplify. It reads:

Most of what I really need to know about how to live, and what to do, and how to be, I learned in kindergarten. Wisdom was not found at the top of the graduate school mountain but there in the sand box at nursery school.

These are the things I learned: Share everything. Play fair. Don't hit people. Put things back where you found them. Clean up your own mess. Don't take things that aren't yours. Say you're sorry when you hurt someone. Wash your hands before you eat. Flush. Warm cookies and cold milk are good for you... Live a balanced life. Learn some and think some and draw and paint and sing and dance and play and work every day some.

Take a nap every afternoon. When you go out into the world, watch for traffic, hold hands and stick together. Be aware of wonder. Remember the little seed in the plastic cup. The roots go down and the plant goes up and nobody really knows how or why, but we are all like that.

Goldfish and hamsters and white mice and even the little seed in the plastic cup—they all die. So do we.

And then remember the book about Dick and Jane and the first word you learned, the biggest word of all: LOOK. Everything you need to know is in there somewhere. The Golden Rule and love and basic sanitation. Ecology and politics and sane living.

Think of what a better world it would be if all of us—the whole world—had cookies and milk about 3:00 every afternoon and then lay down with our blankets for a nap. Or if we had a basic policy in our nation and other nations to always put things back where we found them and cleaned up our own messes. And it is still true, no matter how old you are, when you go out into the world, it is best to hold hands and stick together.

Although most of us laugh and consider this childishly naive, it contains a refreshing note for our high-tech age. In spite of our increase in knowledge, the end of the twentieth century is certainly a period of confusion and uncertainty. Everything is changing. Nothing is certain. Dogmatism is out, free thought is in.

Our world puts a high premium on knowledge and on the confidence it is supposed to bring. But our knowledge has outstripped the ability of most people to absorb it. Our areas of specialty change

so rapidly that what was once valid during our college years becomes outmoded before we enter middle age. Can a person really know anything for certain in such circumstances? Are there any absolutes? Is there anything that will be true not only today, but tomorrow and the day after that as well?

It is against this backdrop that we open the book of 1 John and enter another world altogether. This letter is filled with assurance, confidence, and boldness. The major theme of the book is living confidently. It expresses our certainty, a certainty that Christianity is true and that we as Christians possess eternal life.

The author of this epistle is the apostle John. When he wrote it, he was an old man, and all the other disciples had already died. Only he remained. His long life had afforded him the opportunity to witness the spectacular growth of the church which had begun with only a handful of disciples clustered together in Jerusalem. Now it had spread throughout the known world, and believers had become so numerous it was difficult to count them.

But not all that John had seen was good. As well as growth, there had been dissension, defection, and heresy—even in the churches John had pastored. In fact, one group of people had become involved in a strange doctrine, had left the church, and were trying to persuade other Christians to do the same. Thus, John was compelled to write this letter because he saw it was vital that the church understand clearly what lay at the heart of Christianity. It was vital that Christians grasp firmly the nature of the gospel they had received.

In this wonderful, brief epistle John distills all the wisdom and insight of his long years into a few incisive chapters. John's desire is to make it simple. Although the letter is an amazing piece of theological truth, his focus is always on the basic issues. Possessing a well-developed vocabulary (clearly seen in his gospel and in Revelation), he purposely uses a simple vocabulary in this book. (In fact this is the book first-year Greek students always translate.) John is constantly trying to boil down to the root issues. He defines what C. S. Lewis called "mere Christianity." As one scholar put it, "The writer is occupied with a small number of thoughts which he feels to be the profoundest significance and which he presents again and again." This epistle contains the essence of Christ's teachings.

One major purpose of the letter is to bring Christians to absolute assurance of their salvation. We see this clearly in the last chapter where John says: "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). John is going to show us through a series of tests how we can know for sure that we are Christians.

This is in contrast to John's gospel which has as its purpose to lead unbelievers into faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. John tells us in the last chapter of his gospel that there were many other things that Jesus did which were not recorded, "but these have been written that you

may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name” (20:31).

I saw this just three weeks ago when a young man came up to me in tears after our Newcomers Class. He told me that the truth was convicting him, and I could tell that he was in the process of becoming a Christian. I challenged him to read the Gospel of John. A week later he called me and told me he had asked the Lord Jesus into his life. He said, “When I began to read, I realized Jesus was a real person who really lived. Having faced that, I had to come to grips with what He said and who He was.” The purpose of the gospel of John was fulfilled in his life.

In this first epistle, John’s purpose is to lead those who already believe into a deeper understanding of the faith and into a confidence in what they already possess. This is my prayer for you in the coming weeks. As we study this book, I pray that you will be more assured, more confident and bolder than you have ever been in all your Christian life.

John begins his letter with a brief prologue that is similar to the prologue of his gospel. You may have already noted that the opening of this letter is unusual in that it lacks any salutation or personal reference. In fact, if you have a correct rendering, you will notice that the main verb does not appear until verse 3. This is awkward grammar, but it has a purpose. John wants us to be more concerned with the object of the proclamation than with the proclamation itself.

In these first four verses, we have the eternal purpose of God unfolded for us. These verses capture the essential nature of Christianity. We have described for us what Christianity is along with its purpose. Let us look at the nature of the message described for us in the first two verses.

I. The Nature of the Message

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us— (1 John 1:1-2 NASB)

There are two observations I would like to make from these verses about the essential nature of our message. The first one is found in the first verse.

A. The Essence of Christianity is Life in the Person of Jesus Christ

The most important thing John has to say in his preface is that Christianity is Jesus Christ. This is our message. It is not a system of thought which is at the core of our belief. What Christianity has, apart from any other systems of belief, is life in the person of Jesus Christ—the One who is the Creator and Sustainer of all life and who is the light of all men (John 1:4).

This is why becoming a Christian has nothing to do with joining a church, believing a certain creed, or signing a doctrinal statement. Becoming a Christian is to be related to a person. Just as two-week old Timothy Michael became a member of my family because he shares my life, so a Christian becomes a member of God’s family because he shares God’s life in the person of his Son. Christianity is life. John later says, “He who has the Son of God has life. He who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” It is that simple! Just because you are breathing does not mean you are living. No

matter how religious you might be, you do not have life if you do not possess the Son of God.

It is Christ who is proclaimed in Christianity. John makes two important statements about Jesus in these first two verses.

1. He Was Eternally Pre-existent

John says the apostles proclaimed he who “was from the beginning.” This phrase is parallel to the expression in verse two, “the eternal life which was with the Father.” This is also similar to the beginning of John’s gospel where John says, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God.” John’s point is that Jesus has always existed. Since only divine beings pre-exist, John’s point is to affirm the deity of Christ.

But his emphasis is on a second point.

2. He Was Historically Manifested

There is an dramatic contrast between that first relative clause, “what was from the beginning,” and the next three. The amazing truth that we will celebrate in the coming weeks is that the Eternal entered time and was manifested to men. The Word became flesh and presented himself to the three higher senses of man.

First, they *heard* him. What wonderful words they heard! You have read many of the words Jesus spoke. In John 7:46, the officers who were sent to arrest Jesus testified, “No one ever spoke the way this man does.” Those who heard him were privileged. In Matthew 13:16-17, Jesus declared, “Blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see, but did not see it; and to hear what you hear, but did not hear it.”

Not only did they hear him, they *saw* him. This was the second channel by which men gained knowledge of Christ. Of all the words related to our senses, this appears to be the most important to John for he repeats it four times in the first three verses.

Why would this be so important? I think I know why.

In chapter 20 of the gospel of John, John uses the same word to describe the moment of his own conversion. This chapter records the events of the morning of the resurrection. Mary arose early in the morning and ran to the tomb. When she found the gigantic stone rolled away, she ran to tell Peter and John. They raced back to the tomb. Since John was younger than Peter, he arrived first. He stopped at the door, stooped down and looked in, and he “saw” the linen bands in which the body of Jesus had been wrapped. This word is the most common Greek word for seeing. It indicates only that the object had impressed itself on John’s eyes. From what we know of the circumstances, it may even be that John could not see the linen cloths too well, for he was outside and they were in shadow.

In a few moments, Peter arrived. He had always been more forceful than John; so, true to character, he pushed John aside and entered the tomb. The author tells us that Peter also “saw” the linen cloths, but John uses a different word this time. This word means “to behold with intelligence, to perceive, to scrutinize.” Apparently, there was something about the grave clothes that caused Peter to puzzle over them. For one thing, they were still there. If the body had been stolen, the bands would presumably have been moved with it. Moreover, the bands were lying in order just where the body had been. If the body had been unwrapped, for whatever inconceivable reason, the strips of cloth would have scattered all over and the spices spilled. Finally, the disciples noticed that the napkin that had been around the head was not with the other grave clothes but was in a

place by itself. That is, it was lying precisely where it had been when it was around the head of Jesus, in accordance with Jewish practices of embalming. What would account for the presence and the arrangement of the grave clothes? Nothing but a resurrection in which the transformed body of Jesus would have passed through the linen cloths leaving them undisturbed.

At this point, the significance of the grave clothes got through to John, for he tells us that he “saw” and he believed. This is the third word for seeing and means “to see with understanding.” It is this last word that John uses three times in the preface of his epistle. Others might doubt, but at least he had seen Jesus with an insight that led to belief.

They also *touched* him. This is the third channel through which John gained knowledge of Christ. He “handled” him. This word means “to feel after or to grope,” as a blind person might do. It also means “to examine closely.” Jesus was no phantom. He was a real person. It is possible that John was thinking of the Lord’s invitation to his disciples after the resurrection to come and touch him. In Luke 24:39, he said, “Look at my hands and my feet. It is I myself! Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have.”

This is our message. It is life in a person—eternally pre-existent and historically manifested. As G. Campbell Morgan put it in *The Crises of the Christ*:

He was the God-man. Not God indwelling a man. Of such there have been many. Not a man deified. Of such there have been none save in the myths of pagan systems of thought; but God and man, combining in one Personality the two natures, a perpetual enigma and mystery, baffling the possibility of explanation.

John’s words were a strong statement against false teachers of his day, and of ours as well. Our message is life centered in a person. He who was from the beginning is he whom the apostles heard, saw and touched. You cannot distinguish between Jesus and the Christ, the historical and the eternal. They are the same person—God and man.

This knowledge is critical today for there are many contemporary teachers who would regard much of the gospels as myths. But you cannot mythicize the incarnation. C. S. Lewis’ words in his classic book *Mere Christianity* speak clearly to this issue and reinforce John’s words:

I am trying here to prevent anyone from saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic—on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg—or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God; or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that option open to us. He did not intend to.

This is our message: life in a person. This is the essence of Christianity. In its purest form, Christianity is nothing more than seeing Jesus. As Peter put it in his epistle, “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”

This leads us to our second observation from these verses.

B. This Life Is Validated in the Apostles’ Proclamation

The historical manifestation of the eternal life was proclaimed, not monopolized. The revelation was given to the few for the many. The apostles were to dispense the message to the world. The manifestation unto us becomes a proclamation unto you.

John uses two words to describe the apostolic announcement: “to bear witness” and “to proclaim.” The apostolic ministry involved both a testimony and a proclamation.

Both words imply an authority but each carries a different kind. “To bear witness” is based upon the authority of experience. This activity only belongs to an eyewitness. A person must be a witness before he is competent to bear witness. The true witness only speaks of what he has heard and seen for himself, never of what he has gathered second hand. “To proclaim” carries the authority of a commission. The experience is personal, the commission is derived. In order to witness, the apostles must have seen and heard Christ for themselves; in order to proclaim, they must have received a commission from him.

Jesus not only manifested himself to the disciples to qualify them as eyewitnesses, he also gave them an authoritative commission as apostles to preach the gospel. Possessing these credentials, John is very bold. Having heard, seen, and touched the Lord Jesus, he bears witness to him. Having received a commission directly from him, he proclaims the gospel with authority.

This is critical because it is important for us to realize that the message we have received is not a philosophical speculation or a tentative suggestion. Nor is it a modest contribution to the world of religion. The message we have is a dogmatic affirmation of the truth by those whose experience and commission qualified them to make it. Their proclamation is preserved for us in the writings which have become the New Testament. Today, we are to take these writings, and having entered into the experience of the apostles through them, we are to proclaim the same message to the world. This life is validated in the proclamation of the apostles.

Now, why was this done? John concludes his preface by giving us the objective of this proclamation in verses 3-4.

II. The Purpose of the Proclamation

...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1:3-4)

John says this life will result in two wonderful things. The proclamation is not an end in itself. Its purpose, both immediate and ultimate, is now defined.

A. The Immediate Purpose is Fellowship

The intimacy which was created by Christ with his disciples when he was on the earth, and was deepened by the coming of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost, was not to be limited to them. It was to extend to every generation.

It is interesting to me that John does not say, “We write these things to you that you may have fellowship with the Father.” Rather, he says, “We write these things that you may have fellowship with us.” The immediate purpose of the gospel is not salvation but fellowship. When properly understood, this is the meaning of salvation. The essence of salvation is the restoration of relationships. “Fellow-

ship” means to have things in common. What we possess in common is the life of God.

John’s words are an echo of the Lord Jesus’ prayer in the garden: “That they may all be one...that they may be in us” (John 17:21). Our horizontal oneness depends on our vertical oneness. Thus, John adds the phrase, “indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Fellowship with one another is impossible without fellowship with the Father and the Son. The restoration of relationships is the essence of Christianity.

I think these verses are a rebuke to much of our modern evangelism and church life. We are too often content with an evangelism that does not lead others into a deep fellowship with the Father or into a deep communion with one another. But this is the essence of Christianity.

Some of you have heard about the time I first experienced this kind of intimacy while I was attending seminary. One night, four of my friends and I went out for dessert. I was taking a group dynamics class at the time and decided to share some of the class exercises with them. There was such an atmosphere of honesty, concern and acceptance, that we began to be more vulnerable with each other. And we shared things which we had never shared with anyone else before: confessions of sins, fears, and dreams. This became so exciting, we stopped using the exercises and just continued sharing. When we left the coffee shop, it was 7:00 the next morning! We had been sharing for almost ten hours. To this day, those four men are my closest friends. Although we no longer live near one another, we have met together every year for the past 14 years. When we get together there is always a renewed openness and intimacy. This past summer we attended a Mount Hermon Family Camp together. After we put our children to bed, each evening we would meet to examine each other’s marriage, to encourage and exhort one another. It was a wonderfully healing time.

This is what God desires for our fellowship. Listen to what Keith Miller says:

The neighborhood bar is possibly the best counterfeit there is to the fellowship Christ wants to give His church. It’s an imitation, dispensing liquor instead of grace, escape rather than reality, but it is a permissive, accepting, and inclusive fellowship. It is unshockable. It is democratic. You can tell people secrets and they usually don’t tell others or even want to. The bar flourishes not because most people are alcoholics, but because God has put into the human heart the desire to know and be known, to love and be loved, and so many seek a counterfeit at the price of a few beers.

With all my heart I believe that Christ wants His church to be...a fellowship where people can come in and say, “I’m sunk!” “I’m beat!” “I’ve had it!”

My friends, the church is not a cathedral! It is to be a hospital! God is in the process of restoring relationships. Let me be specific. Where do you go when the bottom drops out of your life? Who cares enough to listen when you cry? Who affirms you when you feel rotten?

What if your spouse is an alcoholic? Or if your son tells you he’s a practicing homosexual? What if your husband walks out, or if he is sexually abusing your two daughters? Or you?

Who can you turn to if you just got fired? Or you just got out of jail? Or when your 16-year-old daughter tells you that she is pregnant? Or after you beat your children and you are afraid and ashamed? Or when you can’t cope with your drug habit any longer? Or if you need professional help because you are near an emotional breakdown?

Do you know what you need? A place of refuge! You need a friend who can listen to you and reintroduce you to the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort. The immediate purpose of the proclamation is fellowship.

John then gives us the ultimate purpose which is a by-product of restored relationships.

B. The Ultimate Purpose is Joy

The fellowship with one another, based on a fellowship with the Father and Son, issues itself in fullness of joy. Fullness of joy is a common expression in John’s writings. I believe it is significant that in every case where it is used there is an allusion to fellowship with God or with each other.

Joy is the fruit of restored relationships, for joy and love are related. Jesus said to his disciples, “Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. If you keep My commandments you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father’s commandments and abide in His love. These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full. This is My commandment that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:9-12). To experience the love of God and realize that God is using you to love another person is to experience joy.

Do you remember the first time you experienced that joy, when you felt God using you to love another person? That is what life is meant to be! If you experience this, you will never want to live life in any other way. This is why I enjoyed taking our high school students to Mexico year after year. I wanted them to taste what it was like to be used by God in another person’s life. Once that happens, you will never be the same. Some of you have already experienced this.

Life is meant to be lived in fellowship, and joy is the fruit of restored relationships. This is our message: life centered in a person, a life that produces fellowship and joy. We were never meant to dwell in the fog of this world with no vision of our Creator. This is why God came near—to be seen. And this is why those who saw him were never the same.

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