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# The Case for Authentic Christianity



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Message by Pastor Tom, Interim Lead Pastor  
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Scripture Passage 1 John 1:1-4  
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There is probably no greater joy for parents/grandparents than when some little person carrying a blanket drops a book in your lap and says, read a story. So in an instant you are off to Hundred Acre Wood or perhaps Narnia, or wherever. Many of these stories begin with these 4 captivating words.

### ...Once Upon A Time...

Those four words open the door to a world in which time can go backwards and forwards, dragons breathe fire, princesses live in white castles, and if they are lucky now and again, they find a frog that used to be a handsome prince who was turned into a frog by a wicked witch, and her kiss instantly restores him to both his youth and his wealth, and, off they go to live happily ever after in the white castle. It is a world of magic and make-believe, where we can create our own fantasy and live it out.

But that is not the kind of world that God created. The Bible does not begin...once upon a time. The world of the Bible is rooted in both history and in reality. It is earthed in tragedy and murder, intrigue and politics, war and rape. There are no princesses in white castles, and certainly there are no frogs to kiss hoping to find your prince.

We must never read the Bible through rose-colored glasses. The world of the Bible is in every sense of the word, a world of history and reality.

Through this spring, we will unpack the truth we find in a small but vital book which is called 1<sup>st</sup> John. It is a must-read book!

It is written for us by the same person who wrote the Gospel which bears his name, he also wrote several other small letters, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John, and finally the last book of the Bible which we know as Revelation, which is really the revelation or the apocalypse of Jesus Christ.

The stage for every book in the Bible is always the stage of history as it was at that time, and 1<sup>st</sup> John is no exception. We need to paint the backdrop for us. Some of you may be familiar with this. Some of you may not.

In the literature of postmodernism today, there is a move towards what is called deconstructionism. That means, when you read a passage or a book, the only meaning that matters and is real is not what the writer meant, but what it means to you at that time. Each person then has their own interpretation, their own point of view.

That is not how we read Scripture. Our search for meaning starts with, what did this mean to the writer? Why did he write this at this time? This is the context or the background.

1<sup>st</sup> John was written against a background of what is usually called **GNOSTICISM**, which comes from the Greek word *gnosis* = knowledge. Gnosticism came to rise in the late 1<sup>st</sup> and into the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It was not really a systematic doctrine, but rather the umbrella title to a whole series of thoughts and ideas.

The central emphasis of gnosticism lay in dualism, that means it divided life into what was spiritual and what was material. This division was crucial because Gnosticism taught that only what was spirit was pure and holy, and everything that was material and physical was evil and sinful, and more than that these two worlds or realms could not meet or have any interaction.

Three serious aberrations that come to us in this system of thought.

#1 Theological - Gnosticism essentially undermined the truth of the Incarnation and the person of Christ, since he could not be both God (spirit) and human (flesh) at the same time. For example, the gnostic could

never have written as in John 1:14 "...the Word became flesh..." That would violate the essential dualism of its teaching.

#2 Moral - this disconnect of spirit and flesh also affected belief and behaviour. Since flesh was sinful and fallen we could deal with our moral struggles in one of two extremes. Either we would try to beat and whip our body into morality in an attempt to save the soul or we would simply abandon any moral discipline since it was assumed that God was really only interested in some spiritual or higher part of us.

These two attitudes are the source of all kinds of distorted ways to understand our humanity, including our sexuality and also what it means to be spiritual. It gives us even today that false dichotomy that thinks God is only interested in our spiritual life. On the contrary, God is not interested in only some spiritual part of us. God is interested in all of our life.

#3 A final expression of this dualistic disconnect is seen in the way in which many Christians ignore the whole subject of creation and the environment. We see salvation only in spiritual terms, and in response, many non-Christians end up worshipping creation and the environment rather than the Creator.

Gnosticism also taught that salvation came through steps of knowledge as we struggled intellectually to climb higher and higher on the path of knowledge. In Gnostic teaching, salvation came by knowledge, creating an intellectual aristocracy. Secret initiation ceremonies led its Gnostic pilgrims upwards towards their intellectual nirvana.

But Gnosticism could never really give you assurance. There was always another step to take on this intellectual ascent. You never knew if, or when, you had arrived.

This is the climate against which John writes his letter. This is why we find the phrase "we know" salted throughout the book. In fact it occurs almost 30 times in just over 100 verses. This is why the theme of assurance is repeated again and again.

John did not want his readers to be lost in the maze of uncertainty, of ambiguity and insecurity. He did not want them to sink in the quicksand of Gnosticism. He wanted them to stand on the solid ground of what they could know with certainty and confidence, so that they could live with assurance and proclaim the Gospel with conviction.

Nearly 2,000 years later, they need to read and grasp the message of this letter is as great as it was in his day. As Christians, we seem to be losing their grip on the essentials of the faith, and assurance is slipping through our fingers. As the New Age movement, a kind of gnosticism for our day with its own gurus, attracts and entices people, we need to be recalled to the truth about how to live with certainty in uncertain times. The clear orthodoxy of faith is being replaced by a myriad of beliefs.

The greatest struggles and challenges that we face in our times are not environmental, or political, or social. Important as these causes are, the greatest struggle we face is really spiritual.

A friend gave me a book several years ago, the title is "Can Man Live Without God?" The question posed in the title is really obsolete. The real dilemma is that this is exactly what we are trying to do and it is not working out very well!

1<sup>st</sup> John 1:1-4 is often called the Prologue. This is one of the most tightly packed and tangled sentences you will find in the entire New Testament.

## 1 John 1

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched-- this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.

2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.

3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

4 We write this to make our joy complete.

I would like to suggest to us that John draws us four circles of credibility. Four circles that have to overlay and intersect with one another in **the case for authentic Christianity**.

We will see that each of us may find our way into Christianity through one of these circles acting like a stepping stone to lead us into our experience with the authentic Christ.

### HISTORICAL

"that which was from the beginning..."

If you are familiar with the Bible, you will know that this throws back all the way to the opening verse of the Bible, Genesis 1:1. In the beginning, God..."

This also echoes the opening words of John's Gospel "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was God..."

This phrase is an opening statement/affirmation of the fact that the Christian faith and Christ himself is rooted in history. This is not a made-up story that starts "once upon a time." Rather authentic faith is grounded in the reality of history.

When the history of Israel and the Jewish people is told, the methodology, the strategy is always go back and tell the story. Go over the events of history. This is what God did. The stones were left in the Jordan River as a physical reminder of what God had done. The question is not how do you feel about these stones? Or how do you feel about crossing the river? The only question is "What do these stones mean?"

It is a fact of reality that the historical foundations underpinning the Christian message and the life of Jesus Christ are exceedingly secure. The Jewish procedure for handing down records and recording and writing testimony

was exceedingly detailed and careful. In the Gospels, we possess 4 outstanding documents about the life of Jesus Christ. They are rooted as we will see in eye-witness testimony.

The Christian faith is tethered to the historical fact of Jesus Christ. This is no blind leap into the dark. This is no faith in faith. This is faith that rests on solid evidence and that evidence is gathered for us in the Bible.

We need to remember that the purpose of the Bible is not to get people to believe in the Bible, but to get people to believe in God. Israel found renewal when they came back to the Bible in the days of Ezra. Nations have sunk into moral quicksand when they have sought to live outside its truth.

Authentic Christianity is a historical faith. We did not create it. We did not make it up.

If I was a philanthropist, I would take you all to Israel for about a month, to walk the streets of Jerusalem, to stand at the shores of Galilee, to see the cave where the Dead Sea Scrolls were found, let some of the sand of Israel run through your fingers. It would declare to you in unmistakable terms that our faith has a long history, and we can go back there and hold it in our hands.

The books of Kings Chronicles, and Samuel would take on whole new meaning. The history of the Old Testament would begin to form in fresh ways. You would read the Gospels like never before! You would hear the Beatitudes echo in the lovely octagonal chapel set on the green slopes of the hillside.

You would hear your mind saying over and over again, this is history.

But while that historical foundation is critical, by itself it is not enough. Historical truth alone can produce a faith that lives in the past and which easily becomes tradition. We do not want that.

## PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

John uses 4 crucial phrases to talk about the circle and witness of personal experience. They are designed to move towards the most physical.

We have heard: even in the Old Testament, people heard the voice of God, so this is basic

We have seen: word for to see with our eyes - it is the evidence of sight

We have looked at: didn't he just say that?

**NO.** This is a different word. It has the idea that you look at something to understand it, to

grasp its meaning and significance.

Our hands have handled.

This echoes the invitation of the Risen Christ to Thomas to come and put his hands into his side. Handle me and see!

The circle of history needs a circle of personal experience. That is what the testimony and the witness of the first disciples stood on.

The link from their eye-witness testimony to us comes in a great statement Jesus makes to Thomas just after his confession about who Jesus is.

## John 20

**28 Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!"**

**29 Then Jesus told him, "Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed."**

This reminds us that each of our lives must encounter a personal experience with the living and risen Christ. It will be different for each one of us, but this becomes our story. This is what we can share. This is the story we have to tell. When we meet people at work who in one or another are uncertain, this is what we can share with certainty. This is when we can

start to tell what we have come to know.

We live in times in which people are hungry and searching for some kind of spirituality. They want to see and know. They need someone to come and say to them, my hands have handled the truth. I have heard the voice of the living God speak to me.

This is the testimony that adds flesh and blood to the history. This is what turns truth into witness.

## COMMUNAL

The third circle of credibility we will call communal.

3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.

The purpose of the Gospel is not just salvation. We evangelicals like to put it like that, but actually the deeper purpose of salvation is fellowship, Greek **KOINONIA**. In its widest sense this embraces the truth of salvation, but it moves us beyond thinking of salvation and defining Christianity in individualistic terms. Salvation is also about community.

Koinonia started as a word that meant a business partnership, then became used to mean the marriage relationship. Then Christians kind of took it over as a unique word to mean that particular sense of fellowship and commitment that we must have to one another as believers in Christ, and it is to be stimulated by the fellowship that each of us has with God the Father through His Son.

It is saying that there is both a vertical and a horizontal dimension to fellowship. It is not enough just to say, I have fellowship with God and that is enough for me. If left only there, that mystical idea simply repeats the essential problem of gnosticism. You define something only in its pure spiritual dimension and at some perfect level, and you never have to translate it into reality where the rubber hits the road.

The mysticism of fellowship with God has to become physical and factual in our fellowship with each other. That is the work of the Cross. That is the work of the gospel. Bonhoeffer said "Every man is called separately and must follow alone." We know that is true, but as soon as we do that and come and stand at the Cross, we find that we are not alone. We are invited to experience the fellowship of the Cross.

Sometimes we ask what can we do to increase fellowship at the church?

That is really the wrong question. Christian fellowship is not an ideal which we create, rather it is a reality created by God in Christ Jesus in which we are invited to participate.

Fellowship is like salvation. We enter into it by grace. Our community with one another rests—not on what we will do for each other, but solely on what Jesus Christ has done for both of us.

We need to realize with humility that our society is not asking or expecting the church to be perfect. It is asking us to be authentic, to be real, to be honest, and when we mess up, we need to admit that.

I am challenged by what Sheldon Vanauken says:

The best argument for Christianity is Christians. Their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is Christians. When they are sombre and joyless... when they are narrow and repressive, then Christianity dies a thousand deaths....But when the joy, the certainty, the completeness, and the beauty of a Christian community is cultivated and communicated,

then evangelism is the glorious result."

Too many people have experienced the church at its worst. We need to give them the opportunity to see and experience the church at its best.

As we move out of modernism and its emphasis on the individual and individual growth, we are seeing today a whole new hunger and search for community. People do not go to Starbucks just for coffee, they go to connect with other people.

This is a time for the church to renew its prayer and desire for koinonia, to become a welcoming community, more than ever we need the church for the effective proclamation of the Gospel. Declaring the good news is not the task of the solo evangelist any more. It does not take place in a vacuum. It needs to be heard within the living reality of a healthy community of Christians in a local situation being a witness to the life of Jesus.

The word of Life is about a person. Jesus. But it needs to be demonstrated by a people, the church.

My primary interest here at VCBC is not church growth, although I love to see the church grow and fill up. My primary

desire is for church health because where there is church health, there will be church growth.

## EXPERIENTIAL

John says ... (verse 4) We write this to make our joy complete.

John calls us to one of the **BIG** words of the Christian faith, **JOY**. It is far far beyond happiness. We are told that Jesus entered into the joy of His Father and he wanted it for his disciples.

### John 15:

**11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.**

What is joy? Here's my definition:

Joy comes when we connect the struggles of life to the purposes of God.

Joy is not always for today. Sometimes joy comes after the pain. Joy is often the reward that comes after struggle and pain. Sometimes we cannot see joy for a long time. Sometimes joy comes when we have no more tears left to cry, and we have to ask the deeper question what is the secret that lies in this event? And when the long dark night of the soul slowly begins to vanish, we may find the first traces of joy come like the first fingers of the sunrise.

The gift of joy is perhaps the ultimate testimony to our faith.

So we can draw these four circles or on-ramps into the Christian faith, historical, personal experience, communal, experiential.

I would suggest that these 4 circles do not always come into this linear fashion for people who are seeking authentic Christianity. Different people will have different starting places in their quest for truth.

Each of these circles will be like on-ramps. Different people will use different ones to move into their experience of knowing Christ.

What we must understand is that we do not remain standing on the on-ramp we start on. We need to move and develop our faith beyond where we started, otherwise our Christian experience will be stunted and underdeveloped.

Let me explain that, and ask, where do you find yourself in his process?

Some people, the left-brained ones like me, may find their way into the faith. Their on-ramp as I call it, by going through the historical door. This is the evidence they need to start, and then they need to find their way into the other circles. Without personal testimony, without the

give and take fellowship and in the absence of joy, their faith will become cerebral and stunted. Without community their faith will become individualistic and turn inward.

Others will find their way into faith through the circle of personal experience. What is important is that they do not stay there or their faith will become weak without a strong foundation in truth. Personal experience alone will not sustain faith through the ups and downs of life.

Others who are lonely and hungry for relationships may find their way to God through the fellowship of the church. Their need for community drives them to seek for truth and so they start on their journey. Again, they will need to develop the other circles of faith to deepen and develop their spiritual life.

Others may come to Christ through a crisis of life. Pain and tragedy are the ways in which God gets our attention, and so we find meaning for our struggle beyond the pain. Again, they cannot stay in that circle. They will need to grow their faith in the other circles.

So different people each at different times of their lives, and each with different circumstances need to have before them the evidence for authentic Christianity.

Which does it need to be for you this morning and at this season of your life? Which is your starting place? Are you on of these on-ramps into authentic Christianity?

In the final analysis, we are not talking about a philosophy. It is not an idea. It is not a program. At the heart of authentic Christianity, we find a person. His name is Jesus!