

## **Time for a Reality Check: An Introduction to First John**

\*Babylon Bee article for intro.

We hear at times about great numbers of people becoming Christians. How seriously can we take such claims? When I came to faith there were nine others who responded at the same five day youth event. However by the time the follow up finished I was the only one still following Jesus. The others all lost interest as the weeks went by. I have never been able to lose interest & that was 20 years ago in the summer. Something captivated my heart in the summer of 96, something shifted deep within. At the youth event the gospel message we all heard was clear enough, but only one of that group of ten was still following Jesus a few months after. I've no doubt the other nine were moved emotionally by the message & were sincere in their prayer of commitment at the time, but the reality is I was the only one who remained impacted. As a new Christian I noted that. I also noted that I had prayed a similar prayer of commitment a number of times before but this was the only time it actually worked. (Romans 10...)

I don't believe for one second that my remaining had anything to do with my stick-ability compared to the others. NO, the difference is down to the fact that my response was not just an emotional reaction to a powerful presentation, or an 'in-the-moment' personal decision, or a prayer prayed because I was pressured into it. The difference is an awakening happened deep within my heart. I began to read the Bible with new eyes to find out what had happened to me & went to every Christian meeting I could get to. The Bible calls this new birth or regeneration & when it truly happens to a person I do not believe there is anything Satan & his demons can do to undo it. As John puts it 1 John 5:4; **"everyone born of God overcomes the world."** I believe that was the difference between me & the other nine. According to the Bible it was not something I had done that made the difference it is what God had supernaturally done in me – I had been born again!

This is how Jesus explained it to a man called Nicodemus according to chapter three of John's Gospel. John sets up the story with the backdrop of John 2:23-25. He records; **"Now while he was in Jerusalem at the Passover Festival, many people saw the signs he was performing & believed in his name. But Jesus would not entrust himself to them, for he knew all people. He did not need any testimony about mankind, for he knew what was in each person."** Jesus also knew what it took to produce real & lasting change in people, hence his following conversation with Nicodemus – it wasn't the visible miracles as impressive as they were it was an invisible miracle within – being born again. Supernatural phenomenon, or the poor substitute of fleshly excitement, can gather a crowd & even get a response but it is only new birth that brings true, lasting & palpable conversion to human hearts. People can be coerced into praying a prayer or making a profession in any number of ways & for any number of reasons but only God can cause someone to truly believe from the heart! This is why Jesus never preached put up your hand & repeat after

me but rather take up your cross & follow after me! I had this thought lately: Is it any more error to declare an infant regenerate at baptism than it is to declare a person born again just because they raise their hand & recite a prayer? We can be so quick to point out error in other Christian traditions & so slow to see it our own.

I remember once as a teenager witnessing to a woman in Belfast City Centre. She looked me up & down, then smiled at me & said, *'bless you; you'll grow out of this.'* Well as it turned out I grew into it. Over the last 20 years there have been times when I have wanted to leave church & Christianity but just couldn't. I have never been able to undo what he has done in me. I don't understand all the ins & outs of this but I know I am held in his grip of grace. In those moments when I have wanted to walk away it's Simon Peter's words that come to mind. After many had turned back & no longer followed Jesus, Jesus asked the Twelve; **"You do not want to leave too, do you?"** Peter answered; **"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe & to know you are the Holy One of God."** They had come to believe & know... This same assurance is reflected in the words of 1 John. Peter & the others simply could not un-believe or un-know this. When they considered all the options, worldviews & arguments none of them were able to outshine Jesus in their hearts. Now that their spiritual eyes had been opened they could not un-see what they saw in Christ – that is the work of God in a human heart & that is what assures the *Authentic Christian* of the reality of **"Christ in me the hope of glory"**. John writes this letter so true Christians can know for sure that they have eternal life... that they have the real thing (5:13)!

Paul writes to believers in Ephesians 2:4; **"But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved."** There it is again – regenerating grace! Then on down in verse 8-10 he writes; **"For it is by grace you have been saved through faith – and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."** The Christian is God's handiwork from start to finish, isn't that good news! Christianity is not a self-help program it is the reality of God at work within us – from start to finish. However if this is true it follows that God's work will also be evident in every true Christian. If you are a work of God then there will be evidence of God's work in your life! Simple! That's one of the main points of this black & white letter of 1 John. Is there evidence of God working in us changing our thinking, living & relationships? Do we have the real thing or are we chasing after something fake?

#### THE PURPOSE OF FIRST JOHN

John gives us three tests to hold over our lives to see if we have *Authentic Christianity* or if we have been fooled by some counterfeit. The first test is the moral test – do you obey God's commands? The second test is the doctrinal test – do you believe Jesus is the Son of God? The third test is the love test - do you

love God & his children? One Study Bible notes; *“Early in the letter these tests appear distinctly, but as John proceeds they are increasingly intertwined into a unified picture of the truly gospel-transformed life.”* Moral obedience matters! Correct doctrine matters! Love for God & one another matters! In fact being healthy in each of these overlapping areas is what proves or disproves our Christianity according to John. This is what we will see!

John also gives us examples of what *Counterfeit Christianity* looks like. Firstly, it looks like either denying we sin at all or else living in sin & thinking it doesn't matter (1:8-2:1). Secondly, it looks like hating a Christian brother or sister (2:9-11). Thirdly, it looks like loving what the system of this world loves (2:15-17). Fourthly, it looks like denying key truth about Christ or it looks like seeking revelation or mystical experiences beyond Christ. In others words it looks like taking from or adding to Christ (2:18-27). We'll go deeper into all these things as we go through the letter section by section.

## BACKGROUND & SETTING

Although John was greatly advanced in years when he wrote 1 John, he was still active in ministry. He was the last remaining apostle who had intimate, eyewitness association with Jesus throughout his ministry, death, resurrection & ascension. According to the church Fathers John lived in Ephesus at this time & was involved in extensive evangelism & overseeing many of the churches that had arisen in Asia Minor. 1 John, as well as his other writings, was probably written for the benefit of these churches. One church Father called Papias who had direct contact with John described him as a *“living & abiding voice.”* As the last remaining Apostle, John's testimony was highly authoritative among the churches with many seeking to hear from the one who had first-hand experience with the Lord.

Most scholars believe 1 John was written to combat an early form of what became Gnosticism. After Paul's battle with the Judiasers, Gnosticism was the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first 3 centuries. John is most likely dealing with the seeds of this heresy which threatened to weaken the fundamentals of the gospel & cast doubt on the complete sufficiency of Christ.

Gnosticism believed matter was evil & only spirit was good. This led to the idea that either the body should be treated harshly, asceticism; or that sin committed in the body didn't matter because it had no effect on the spirit, immorality was fine then. This division between matter as evil & spirit as good is called dualism & it is completely as odds with Scripture. In fact so much of the super spirituality & false religion of our day has its roots in this kind of thinking. Christian spirituality on the other hand is very practical, very applicable to everyday life. It has to do with living morally, loving others & believing truth about Jesus with our whole being. The fruit of Gnosticism was chasing superior knowledge & mystical experiences at the expense of remaining in truth, walking in obedience & loving God & others in practical ways.

When you learn a bit about this you can see why Gnostic tendencies clashed with the Apostles teaching about Jesus. How could God who is spirit take on physical evil human flesh? The incarnation clashed with their world view, John is writing to defend the Incarnation. This heresy undermined the Incarnation in two basic forms. The first form asserted that Jesus' physical body was not real but only seemed to be physical (this is known as Docetism). This is why John opens this letter by strongly affirming the physical reality of Jesus (1:1-4). The second form of the heresy was led by a man called Cerinthus who asserted that the Christ's "spirit" descended on the human Jesus at his baptism but left him just before his crucifixion. John's writings make clear the Jesus who was baptized at the beginning of his ministry was the same person who was crucified on the cross (5:6). The biblical view of Jesus confirms his complete humanity as well as his full deity.

Another element of Gnosticism is that it claimed elevated knowledge or revelation, higher truth known only to those in on deep things. Only the initiated had the mystical knowledge of truth which went beyond even what had been revealed to the Apostles. This group viewed John's teaching as inferior. I'm convinced that if Christians only knew a little of the context of the NT they wouldn't get sucked into similar movements today. The false teaching John is dealing with flowed out of this so called superior knowledge.

The goal of the authentic Christian is not to chase new revelation, but to remain in Christ by growing in their understanding of what has already been revealed in him – the faith once for all delivered to the saints. For the authentic Christian truth does not come in instalments; truth came once for all in Christ. So John writes in the context of early Gnosticism; 2:20; 26-27 **“But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth... I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him.”**

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

We should look at John's letters as a follow on from his Gospel. He wrote his gospel in the same context. In fact it would be a good idea to read his Gospel along with his letters as we go through this series & immerse ourselves in his Spirit-inspired writings. John wrote his Gospel & letters as an old man. He had witnessed firsthand the ministry, death, resurrection & ascension of Jesus. He had witnessed the birth of the church & all the up & downs of the first generation of Christianity. The other Scripture writing Apostles & Prophets had laid their pens down when John picked his up towards the end of his life & in an inspired flurry wrote his Gospel, three letters & the book of Revelation. This probably happened sometime between AD80 & AD95. Isn't it fitting that the disciple most intimate with Jesus on earth gets to complete the canon of Scripture as a tender & wise man of age.

No one is more black & white when it comes to truth & Christian living than John, yet he is known in church history as the Apostle of Love. That's the kind of Christian leaders today's world needs, those who speak absolute truth with tender hearts. John writes with the authority of an apostle & with the warmth of a pastor & with the love of a parent for their children. The grace of God had brought John a long way from his days as one of the 'sons of thunder' who offered to call down fire on a Samaritan village & argued with other disciples about who was the greatest &. John has experienced the transforming power of the *Authentic Christianity* he is writing about. As the first century of Christianity closes John sees dangers on the horizon – dangers Paul had prophesied of years before (Acts 20:28-31) - & he writes to encourage believers to remain in Christ.

Remaining in Christ is what protects God's children from chasing counterfeits. This is why this letter warns of antichrists, false spirits, false prophets & counterfeit anointing. When others go chasing after this or that spiritual extra the authentic Christian can only choose to remain in Jesus because everything else compared to him looks so fake, superficial & disappointing. There simply is no substitute, no addition & no extra knowledge beyond him. I have made an observation over the last 20 years: The people who are always chasing spiritual extras are rarely satisfied, often frustrated, more prone to deception & disappointment with church, but those who rest in the fullness of Christ are happy, holy & confident in their walk with God.

**As we close turn to Colossians 2:2-5 were Paul is also combating Gnostic tendencies.** Did you catch that Paul is saying? The search is over!! Christ is all & Christ is enough! Everything you need to find is found in Christ alone! Why do you think Paul's prayers are often around Christians understanding what they already have in Christ? This is what much of the NT is about. Paul tells the Corinthians; **"Do not go beyond what is written."**

An anti-christ spirit or mindset would have us chasing after spiritual extras & mystical experiences, trying to keep up with new revelations to distract us from discovering the fullness we already have. Some professing Christians are chasing after mystical experiences when they should be resting & living out of their completeness in Christ. They mistake such experiences as the presence of God because they have been birthed into a counterfeit version of Christianity which is actually quite self-seeking, self-serving & self-centred when you assess it. When the woman with the issue of blood connected with Jesus she stopped running from here to there! Her search was finally over! Why is it that so many professing believers keep running from here to there like spiritual junkies after claiming connection to Christ? Running from here to there to find the latest spiritual high they never let their roots go down deep into the all-sufficiency of Jesus! Christ is more than enough! A true work of the Holy Spirit in your life - the real & abiding anointing John speaks of – teaches you that Christ is more than enough & it won't let you move beyond him. All ground beyond him is sinking sand, but it teaches us to remain in Christ, on solid ground.

The good news of the all-sufficient Christ! Ask the question is this teacher or prophet pointing me to what I already have in Christ or is he or she claiming to offer me something extra. Ask, is this Christian teaching undermining or taking away from apostolic teaching about Christ or are they simply holding out the word of truth about Jesus – “the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” as Jude put it?