

The Overlapping Realities of Authentic Christianity | 1 John 5:1-5

The Lubeck Cathedral is a large brick-built Lutheran cathedral in Germany which was completed in 1230, it took around 63 years to build. This famous inscription which you may have heard before is found on one of its walls:

*Ye call Me Master & obey Me not,
Ye call Me Light & see Me not,
Ye call me Way & walk Me not,
Ye call me Life & desire Me not,
Ye call Me Wise & follow Me not,
Ye call Me Fair & love Me not,
Ye call Me Eternal & seek Me not,
Ye call me Noble & serve Me not,
Ye call me mighty & honour Me not,
Ye call Me Just & fear Me not,
If I condemn you, blame Me not.*

These words of course are meant to be a reality check to those whose lips profess Christianity but whose lives reveal something different. John's purpose throughout this letter has been to hold up authentic Christianity. Remember he is an elderly man, the last remaining Apostle, & he is putting all of his remaining energy into making sure believers understand the source & heart of true Christianity. Throughout the letter he has highlighted three key Christian traits – belief, obedience & love. What he does in these five verses is tie these three things tightly together as overlapping & inseparable evidences of authentic Christianity. Yet we also learn that authentic Christianity does not start with any of these three things. No authentic Christianity begins when a person **“has been born of God”** – it is the regenerating work of God, it is God raising the spiritually dead to new life in Christ. The belief, obedience & love John talks about are the inevitable result of being born of God. Then John brings a new theme into his letter, he brings the idea of victory into view & shows us it is another inevitable positive consequence of being born of God. So being born of God, believing in Jesus, loving the Father & loving other Christians, obedience to God's commandments & overcoming the world through Christ's victory are all part of the authentic Christian experience! John touches on all these with great clarity in these verses in order to show they are the overlapping realities of authentic Christianity.

1. Believing the truth about Jesus

John writes in verses 1; **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God”** & he writes in verses 5: **“Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”** So this paragraph opens & closes with the vital importance of believing truth about Jesus. There is no new birth or overcoming the world apart from believing truth about Jesus. There is no vagueness in the language of faith according to John or in the experience of new birth... New birth is a mysterious miracle of God that results in specific visible evidence. Being born of God produces right belief about Jesus & the one who rightly believes in Jesus overcomes the world. It is fitting then that the Greek tense in the word translated **“believe”** is continual. As Adrian Rogers puts it; *“The assurance of my salvation comes not from the fact that I did trust Christ but that I am trusting Christ.”* Are we trusting Christ?

As I noted, there is no vagueness in this continual believing in Christ. A Christian is someone who believes specific things about Jesus! **“Jesus is the Christ”! “Jesus is the Son of God”!** Daniel Akin comments; *“I find it fascinating that [John] bookended this text with the two part confession of the apostle Peter in Matthew 16:16: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* In John’s context of course this clearly marked out true Christianity from the false versions that were developing. It is what we believe about Jesus that marks us out in this world! As Jesus asked; **“Who do you say I am?”** It is not merely believing in Jesus, that he existed, that he was this or that, or having our own opinions about him. Almost everyone believes Jesus existed & almost everyone & every religion & cult has a view on him but it is what we believe about him that marks out the authentic Christian.

How do we make sure we continue to believe the truth about Jesus? John has told us in 2:24; **“Let what you heard from the beginning abide in you. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, then you too will abide in the Son and in the Father.”** That is his way of saying; *“this is how you abide in authentic Christianity, this is how you continue believing the truth about Jesus”* – by abiding in the testimony & teaching of those who literally & physically heard, seen & touched Jesus!

2. Loving the Father & his children

John then continues; **“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God, and everyone who loves the Father loves whoever has been born of him.”** Note John’s use of the word **“everyone”** twice in this verse, highlighting that this is to be true of every authentic Christian. They believe the truth about Jesus & they love the Father & his children. So believing & loving are tied together in very specific ways in John’s mind & they are both the evident result of being born of God. We believe specific things & we love specific people, that is what new birth does to us! Now of course Christians are to love everyone, even enemies, but John is specifically talking about love for one another. As Paul wrote in Galatians 6:10; **“So then, as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, and especially to those who are of the household of faith.”** John is teaching, like Paul, that we are specifically & especially to love one another. Again Jesus’ inescapable new commandment comes to mind; **“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”** Much of John’s teaching on love in this letter is simply an exposition & application of these words of Jesus.

For it is in the community that Jesus is building that we learn to love enemies up close... If we cannot love those in the community of Christ, specifically those in our local fellowship, then we simply do not love as Jesus commands us to. It is so fundamental that we grasp this!

3. Obeying God’s commandments

Listen to how John weaves obedience into the mix; **“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and obey his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.”** These verses show us how to love, the way to love. Love for God & others is not following our feelings or mood, it is keep God’s commandments? We cannot truly love without the guidance of God’s commandments. The commandments of God, as they have been repackaged for us in Christ, are the practical & solid ways we ought to love God & each other. Christ is the perfect example of this & it is his example & instruction we are to follow in this regard. John says; **“we know that we love the children of God, when we love God & obey his commandments.”** Not only is John specific about what we believe about Jesus & who we are to love, he is also specific about how we are to love. We are to love God & his children by obeying God’s commandments. We not only love God when we obey his commandments we also love God’s people because love for God & others, as Jesus has taught us, is the whole point of every commandment ever given by our good & trustworthy God.

So when it comes to loving our brothers & sisters in Christ we trust the commandments of God & not our feelings. This means we will speak the truth in love. It means love is more than just being nice or saying what is easy. It is saying & doing what is best for one another & it is trusting that God always knows what is best for us & others. It is trusting God’s solid love over our mushy feelings.

If we desire to grow in love then meditating on God’s commandments in the light of Christ will help us learn to love God & one another. Yet note that John very importantly adds; **“And his commandments are not burdensome.”** Why did John feel the need to add that in? His commandments are not burdensome. Well we could ask; what is more burdensome to live a life of love or a life of hate? Is it a heavier weight to obey by forgiving or to carry unforgiveness? His commands lead us to love & they lead us away from shame & regret & they so the same for those we counsel. Christ’s commands are more life giving & liberating than all the worlds promises. The enemy will do all he can to convince us of the opposite, as he has from the beginning.

However I think there is another reason John has for saying this. To the person born of God the commandments of God become a delight. When we are born again we receive a new nature. With this new nature comes a new heart with new desires & values. In the New Covenant God’s law is now written on our new heart & therefore we delight in obeying him, in loving the Father & his children. As John Piper puts it; *“What you desire to do with your whole heart is not burdensome to do.”* As Psalm 40:8 HCSB puts it; **“I rejoice to do your will, my God; Your instruction lives within me.”** The new heart does not look for ways out of being obedient it delights in finding new ways to be obedient – new ways to express love for God & his children.

Conclusion: Assurance of victory

John finishes the paragraph with these words; **“For everyone who has been born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”** Note that overcoming, as with belief & love, is the result of new birth. New birth guarantees victory for us. Paul’s words in Philippians 1:6 come to mind; **“And I am sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.”** Specifically John is speaking about overcoming the world which he has defined earlier as **“the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and the**

pride of life.” These are the very things that pull people away from loving the Father & his children, from keeping his commandments. These very desires are what cause people to distrust God’s goodness. Yet John exclaims everyone born of God over comes the world, that is overcomes these very desires. For they instead light in trusting obedience. As Daniel Akin puts it; “Overcomers, via the new birth and faith in Christ, are no longer consumed by what they don’t have or what they do have. That spell has been broken. The shackles have come loose. The blinders have been removed. We no longer pine after stuff. Rather, with new holy affections, we pine after and love God.”

As well as new birth it is the faith that new birth gives that also helps us overcome; **“And this is the victory that has overcome the world our—our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world except the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God?”** New birth is something that happens to us & faith is something we are given. It is faith in Christ’s victory that gives us victory – faith in who he is & what he has done for us & the world! John closes this paragraph as he opened it, with the focus on believing in Jesus! This is where the power to overcome comes from – our faith, specifically our faith in who Jesus is. Faith not our ability to love or obey or even believe but faith in who Jesus truly is. The words **“overcome”** & **“victory”** both come from the Greek word *nike*, which is also the name of the Greek goddess of victory, strength, & speed. John is telling us that all the victory, strength & speed we need to overcome is found in our faith that believes that Jesus is the Son of God - a faith given to us via new birth.

So as I highlighted at he beginning; being born of God, believing in Jesus, loving the Father & loving other Christians, obedience to God’s commandments & overcoming the world through Christ’s victory are all part of the authentic Christian experience! John has touched on all these with great clarity in order to show they are the overlapping realities of authentic Christianity. Again he shows us this not ultimately about trying harder it is about abiding in Christ & simply seeing his victory as our victory because is his work for us on the cross & his work in us by via new birth!