

Creekside Community Church: "Authentic Christianity" 1 John
"Why You Need to Read this Book" 1 John 1:1-4
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John Bruce, Pastor

I've been a member of the same book group for almost 20 years. We read a novel each month and discuss it every second Thursday. Until I joined the group, I never read the introduction most authors include at the beginning of their novel. I wanted to get to the action of the story. But I discovered that if I didn't read the introduction, I often couldn't understand the story. I remember one book we read called, *When Elephants Dance*, about WWII in the Philippines. The book alternates chapters, one telling the grim story of a small community of Filipinos trying to survive the savagery of war in the final days of the Japanese occupation with one telling magical stories from these people's childhoods. In her introduction, the author tells us that she will be weaving together the firsthand experience of her parents in WWII with the tales they told her as she grew up. The group members who read the introduction understood immediately why the action in the book often changed abruptly from a tense torture scene to a tale about magical fishermen. The members of our group who as a habit don't read introductions were lost. "What's going on? What's this story going?" I've learned through embarrassment and shame in many of our discussions, don't skip the introduction. This spring we're going to work our way through the apostle John's first letter and this morning we're going to look at John's introduction to this letter: why he wrote this book, what his theme is, and why we need to read it and understand it. That's why I entitled this passage, "Why You Need to Read this Book." 1 John is a very practical book and yet parts of it are hard to understand. And so before we read John's introduction and why we need to read his book, I want to talk a little bit about the history around this letter. John writes toward the close of the first century. It was a time when most people were religious and as the message of Christ spread through the Empire, people came into the church, believing that they were Christians in spite of the fact that they were still holding tightly to many of the beliefs from their old religions and philosophies. The pure, simple faith in Jesus and His resurrection was being polluted. The line between religion and Christianity and between who was a real Christian and who just sounded like one was becoming blurred. Everybody in the church was talking about Jesus but there was a lot of disagreement about who Jesus was. Even at this early age, Christianity was in danger of becoming one more dish on the Roman smorgasbord of religions; pick whatever you like or mix and match. John was the last living apostle, one of the last living people to have known Jesus personally, and so he writes this letter to clarify who the real Christians are and are not. 1 John is a book of tests. Over and over we'll see the little phrase, "by this we know." "By this we know that we have come to know Him...by this we know we are in Him: By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of error." It's a book about how to tell if you're really a Christian which is why I'm calling this series from 1 John "Authentic Christianity." Because the times in which we live are very similar to the first century.

Just as they did in the 1st century, people today are taking the language and some of the ideas from Christianity without accepting Christ. A couple of weeks ago, I spoke on "Discipling Our Kids," and shared how all the research indicates that the church in America is losing their children; how the vast majority of kids raised in the church walk away from the faith by their sophomore year in college. One of the most convincing explanations for why so many kids are walking away from the faith is that what the church has passed on to them isn't historic Christianity. Notre Dame Sociologist, Christian Smith calls what most kids have gotten from church Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. In their studies, Smith and his team have discovered that most young people believe in a combination of beliefs borrowed from the major world religions. They believe that a god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth and that God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions. The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself. God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when He/She is needed to resolve a problem. Good people go to heaven when they die. In her book, *Almost Christian: What the Faith of Our Teenagers is Telling the American Church*, Kendra Creasy writes "The problem does not seem to be that churches are teaching young people badly, but that we are doing an exceedingly good job of teaching youth what we really believe, namely, that Christianity is not a big deal, that God requires little, and the church is a helpful social institution filled with nice people..." She goes on to say that "if churches practice moral therapeutic deism in the name of Christianity, then getting teenagers to church more often is not the solution (conceivably it could make things worse). A more faithful church is the solution." Perhaps the reason so many kids are abandoning the faith is because we haven't given them the faith. We've given them cheap substitutes. We've traded the historic, objective, faithful gospel of how the grace of God saves us from our sins for a

modern, subjective, pragmatic gospel of achieving success by following certain strategies. And if the church is simply a place to learn how to live a happier and more successful life, we don't need a crucified savior, and our kids quickly figure out that there are other places to learn how to live a successful, happy life without having to get up early on Sundays. The point is that in the 21st century - just like in the first century, there are many false gospels masquerading as authentic Christianity; just as there are many people attending churches in America who think they're born again but who are not. That's why 1 John is so relevant. John tells us what authentic Christianity is and is not and how to know for sure that we know Christ. This morning we'll look at John's introduction to this letter and why we need to read this book.

The first reason we need to read this book: 1. its message is timeless. It never changes. That's why John writes, *"What was from the beginning..."* I believe John is talking about the gospel. And the beginning he refers to is not the beginning of creation or of time, but instead, the beginning of the gospel message, the time when Jesus appeared on earth because that is how John uses "in the beginning" throughout this letter. 1 John 2:7 *Beloved, I am not writing a new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word which you have heard.* And 1 John 2:24 *As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.* Also, 1 John 3:11 *For this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another;* What was from the beginning means the beginning of the gospel, the pure message of Christ to which John was an eyewitness. John says, "Unlike those who now are bringing their own philosophies and ideas from other religions into the church, I've been here from the beginning. I've seen the original. And that's what I want to talk to you about." John is writing to Christians in the Roman province of Asia - which is known today as the nation of Turkey. A group has recently left the church, claiming that they have a superior relationship with Christ and that if the Christians really want to know God in a much deeper way than they do, they also will leave the church and join them. John is writing to assure these believers that they do know the truth. John was the sole survivor of those who had known Jesus personally and so when other teachers claimed that their message was the original message Jesus had brought, the Christians went to John. What else can you do when people preach something new and different from what you've heard, claiming that this was the original teaching of Christ - secretly committed to them by Jesus Himself? There was no NT to compare their message to. Who's to say that Christ didn't reveal this to them? Moreover, this new doctrine was so completely in accordance with the culture and the prevailing climate of opinion that in the eyes of many, it was obviously the way the gospel needed to be "restated" for their day and culture. The specific heresy that was being pushed at this time was called "Docetism" and was an accommodation with Greek philosophy. Greek culture saw matter as evil and spirit as good. There could be no peaceful co-existence between the two. Therefore it was unthinkable that there could be any relationship between God who is pure spirit and absolutely good and the material universe, which by definition was essentially evil. Docetism disputed the biblical doctrine of creation; the material universe being evil must be the product of an inferior power to God. The biblical doctrine of the resurrection must also be jettisoned because the dualistic world view saw the climax of redemption as the liberation of the soul from the body - not the receiving of a new body. But it was in relationship to Christ Himself that dualism gave rise to Docetism. The first disciples of Jesus knew their Master as both a real human being and the Son of God, their Divine Lord. However, when the message of Jesus spread into the regions influenced by Greek thought, it ran up against the dualism of the culture, creating a debate about the true nature of Christ which continued into the following centuries. How could the true God of pure spirit indwell an "evil" body of flesh and blood? Docetism's answer was that since such an indwelling was clearly impossible, Jesus' body of flesh and blood was not real but imaginary; it was an illusion. Docetism comes from the Greek word for illusion. This is why in 1 John, John writes against those who deny that Jesus came in the flesh. So when John writes, *"What was from the beginning..."* it is in the context of the true and original gospel being contaminated, restated, and reshaped by the culture of that time.

That's why John says my letter is about the gospel as it was from the beginning. The message of Christ doesn't change or evolve over time. It is as true today as it was at the beginning. And the timelessness of the gospel is both comforting and discomfoting. It is comforting when I realize that the truth of the gospel does not change with of my feelings or with my circumstances. God never changes. He loves me, sees me clothed in Christ's righteousness, and is working all things together for good and that is just as true when I feel bad as when I feel good: just as true when I'm ignoring Him as when I am thinking about Him. Neither He nor truth changes with my feelings or circumstances. Nor do my responsibilities as a follower of Christ change depending on when or where I live. Husbands are always to love

their wives and wives are always to respect their husbands. Marriage is a lifelong commitment to monogamy in the 21st century just like it was in the first century. Fathers are to teach their children to love Christ and His word in American just like fathers are to teach their children in Tibet. Sex outside of marriage is just as sinful today as it was in Jesus' day. If the Scriptures are timeless, we don't need new information. God gave us everything pertaining to life and godliness from the beginning. The timelessness of the Scriptures gives me a solid foundation to build my life upon. I know what's true and what's not. On the other hand, the timelessness of the gospel is also discomfoting. Because the timelessness of the gospel will always put the church out of step with the constantly changing values of the culture in which we live. In the first century, Christians were known as the people whose homes were open to all but whose beds were open to none - just the opposite of the culture of Rome. In 18th century England, it was the Christians who led the fight to abolish slavery and child labor, even though the rest of the society believed both to be economic necessities. Through the centuries, it has been the followers of Jesus who have built the hospitals and universities and who cared about the rights of the poor and the marginalized when the rest of society was indifferent to those concerns. The reformations and revivals down through church history have always been the result of people going back to the Scriptures and applying its timeless message to the issues of the day. And that's the challenge that faces us today and it has faced Christians in every age and culture. Will we go along with the culture or will we hold fast to the timeless word of God? If the Bible is true and timeless, then it must become our compass and guide, regardless of what our culture says. Our culture will never take the Scriptures more seriously than we take them - which means we have to be willing to be out of step with the opinions of most people - for those people will recognize the difference that knowing Christ makes. So the first reason we need to read this book is because its message is timeless.

The second reason is because its message is verifiable. It is not based upon myths, speculations or opinions but upon objective, historical evidence to which John was an eyewitness. *"...what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands concerning the Word of Life - and the life was manifested (or made visible) and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us..."* 1 John is about what John has learned about God from his first hand experience with Jesus. Unlike those who were deceiving the churches of Asia, Jesus' original disciples, had the unique experience of living in very close proximity to Jesus for three years. They heard His teachings. They saw His life, His miracles, His compassion, and His courage. John even reminds us that he and his fellow disciples "touched with our hands" probably referring to touching the resurrected Christ in Luke 24 and realizing that He wasn't a spirit but flesh and blood. John knows what he's writing about. He was there. He was a companion of Jesus. What he writes is what he heard directly from the mouth of the Lord Himself, what he saw, what he experienced first hand, what he even touched. John knew Jesus intimately. And as Christ's last living disciple and eyewitness, John is able to speak with far greater authority than those who are adapting the message of Christ to their own ideas and for their own ends. John's message isn't based on conjecture, or legends, or some leap of faith. It's based on historical facts of which John was a witness. The Bible is a record of what God has done in history. Our faith is based on historical fact. It is not based on myths or human speculations and opinions or on the teachings of the church passed down over thousands of years and accepted on blind faith. Christianity is based on real life events in the first century of which John and the other apostles were eyewitnesses which means that the message of Jesus is verifiable. It either happened or it didn't. And that's really important for us to understand today. Because faith in Christ has been portrayed as a leap of faith, as wanting to believe something so badly that we begin to believe it in spite of the fact there is absolutely no evidence for it. And that is a false picture of real Christianity. Real Christianity is based on objective, historical evidence. That's why in the book of Acts, the apostles are persuading, arguing and giving evidence for Christ and His resurrection. Because the more you know about history, the more convinced you'll become of the truth of Christianity.

I became a Christian halfway through college, asking Christ to come into my life and forgive my sins and make me the person He wanted me to be in the summer between my sophomore and junior years. And it was great. I experienced joy like I'd never experienced before, peace of mind, and saw my character changing for the better before my eyes. My first year as a Christian was by far the best year of my life up to that point. However, the next summer I begin to have constant nagging doubts about my faith. What if none of this was true? What if I had fooled myself into believing? What if there's no God. What if Jesus never lived? What if He's just a myth? What if the Bible is just a book of legends? I tried to ignore these thoughts but I couldn't. I had this incredible dread that all the great things

that had happened to me over the past 12 months were based on a lie. And if somebody had told me, "Well, you just have to have faith." I would have replied, "That's my problem. I don't have any faith. What do I do with these doubts?" I finally realized that I couldn't ignore or avoid my doubts. I had to find out if there were answers, if the things that Christianity claims are verifiable. And if there weren't, I couldn't remain a Christian and be intellectually honest. So I began listing every doubt and looking for answers. And painstakingly I began to find those answers. The problem was, as soon as I answered one doubt; another sprang up to take its place. There wasn't a moment for the next 18 months that I wasn't plagued by some nagging question about Christianity. But those doubts were my education. I studied and studied. And the more I learned, the more convinced I became of the truth of Christ. The historical evidence was overwhelming. I finally realized that it would take more faith to reject Christ than it did to accept Him.

Suppose I brought a big glass jar of jelly beans next Sunday and told you that whoever could guess the number of jelly beans in the jar could have them. So you all wrote down a number on a piece of paper and gave them to me. Now, would it be possible to figure out whose guess came closest to the actual number of jelly beans? Sure. Just count the number of beans and see who was closest. The best guess might come from an adult or from a child, from somebody who loves jelly beans or from somebody who can't eat sugar. It wouldn't matter who guessed correctly. Because the number of jelly beans in a jar is verifiable. But what if I asked you to write down the name of the best movie ever made. Is it possible to figure out whose answer is correct? No, because the best movie ever made is a matter of preference. One person likes *Citizen Kane*, another likes *Casablanca* and another likes *Caddyshack*. Who's to say who's right? It all depends upon individual preference. Now here's my question. Are matters of faith a jelly bean question or a movie question? Are we talking about verifiable truths or simply matters of preference? Most people in our culture would say that your religious beliefs are simply matters of opinion or preference - which is why many people say, "It doesn't matter what you believe, as long as you're sincere." If it's true for you, then it's true. But what John is saying is that the message he brings is a jelly bean question. It's a question about facts. And until you grasp that your faith is based upon verifiable, historical evidence and not simply on the way you were raised or what your friends or parents believe, your faith will not withstand the storms of life. If Christianity is based upon history, it is either true or not - regardless of how sincere or insincere Christians are. And if Christianity is true, it is true for everyone - not just for Christians but for non-Christians - because it describes God and Jesus and life as they really are. John says that Christianity is based upon objective, historical evidence - the evidence of the courtroom - not blind faith.

The first reason we need to read this book is because its message never changes. The second reason we need to read this book is because its message is verifiable. And the third reason is because its message introduces us to God. "... what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." What had John seen and heard with Jesus? How we have fellowship with God, a friendship with God, an intimate relationship with God. That's the reason Jesus came to earth. Not just to show us how to live a better life. Not even just to die for our sins. Jesus came to reveal God and to bring us back into the intimate relationship with Him for which we were created. John writes in John 1:18 *No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him.* And so John says I'm going to share you what I've learned from Jesus so you can enjoy this fellowship with God along with us. The people who invaded the churches of Asia Minor were proud of how much they thought they knew about God, that they had a secret knowledge that God had revealed only to them. Now put yourself in the average Christians place. You want to know God better. More intimately. And some new people start coming to your church. And they say, "You think you know God. Listen, we've studied with people who really know God. They're teaching truths far deeper than anything you'll hear in this place. Why don't you come with us and learn more? You won't regret it." Well the spiritual side of you wants to know God better and the competitive side of you is intrigued by the idea that you could be more spiritual than the other Christians - well, you can see why these Christians were falling for this stuff. That's why John writes his letter. Because 1 John is a letter about how to know who really knows God. Who really walks with God. Who really experiences intimacy with God. Anybody can say they know God. But can you tell if they're telling the truth? John says there is and that's what this book of the Bible is about. Who God is and how being in fellowship with God will effect your life.

So how can a book introduce me to God? 1 John along with the rest of the Bible claims to be the God-inspired record of God's mighty acts in history: what God has done and how what He has done affects us. God acts in history, revealing more and more of Himself, then inspires men to record those acts in written form. Then as people hear and read those records, His Spirit creates faith in those people and they come into fellowship with God. That's what John means when he writes, "...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." The Scriptures are the way God reveals Himself to us today, the way He speaks to us, changes us, strengthens us, and satisfies us. We cannot have a relationship with God apart from the Bible because all we know about God comes from the Bible. Laurie and I were engaged for a year before we were married. I was living in Berkeley and she in San Diego. This was shortly after the earth cooled and long before the internet or smart phones. The only way we could fellowship together was either over the phone - which was a lot more expensive then than now - or by writing letters. If you had been my roommate, you would have noticed how the first thing I did when I got home was to check the mail. A letter from Laurie made my day. And you might have said to me, "I know how important those letters are to you but Laurie is much more important than those letters." Just like people say today, "God is much more important than the Bible. We worship Him, not the Scriptures." I agree. But just as those letters were the only contact I had with Laurie and the only way to know what she was thinking about and doing, so the Bible is the only way I can know God. Just knowing the Bible is not the goal of the Christian life. The goal is knowing God and living in fellowship with Him. I can't know Him apart from the Bible but I can certainly know the Bible without knowing Him. The Bible can be the wings to the face of God or a veil over the face of God, depending on our attitude. The reason we need to read John's letter or any Scripture is because it introduces us and sustains our fellowship with God. The Bible is the way God speaks to us. When I was a younger Christian, I used to go out and sit on a hill in Berkeley over looking the Bay, hoping that God would speak to me. I'm not sure if He ever did. But I know He spoke to me regularly every morning when I opened up my Bible. Everything the Spirit of God does in our life, the word of God does. The Word is the sword of the Spirit, the way God communicates with us. To neglect the Bible is to neglect God. That's why the more we read the Bible, the more real and present God becomes and the less we read the Bible, the more distant God seems.

Why do we need to read this book? Its message is timeless, verifiable and most importantly, introduces us to God. The New Testament is written by a variety of authors and each has his own distinctive personality and style. What I appreciate about John is his ability to cut to the heart of a matter. And knowing God is at the heart of the gospel and John is going to show us how to know if we really know Him, if it is God we are experiencing or just our imagination. Because we were created for fellowship with God. And He's not far from any one of us this morning. If you will become a follower of Jesus, He will come into your life this morning and become your closest friend, your strongest supporter, your Savior, and your Guide. You only need to ask.

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