

Creekside Community Church: Authentic Christianity: The First Letter of John

“Proofs of His Presence” 1 John 4:13-15

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Proofs of His Presence (1 John 4:13-15)

As many of you know, I attended Biola. It’s a small Christian liberal arts school in Southern California. Biola attracts a fairly broad cross-section of Christians. People come from different denominations; different backgrounds. And they perceive the Christian life in different ways. While I was there, I noticed an interesting dynamic. Students described authentic, or true, Christianity in a variety of ways. Some Christians placed a premium on experience. They thought that authentic Christians had powerful – even miraculous – encounters with God. Other Christians prioritized social engagement. They thought authentic Christians exhibited a concern for the poor, and marginalized. Still others placed a high value on personal virtue. They thought authentic Christians led lives of self-discipline and self-denial. And then there was me, and my friends. We valued the mind. And we thought that authentic Christians held accurate beliefs. We were Biola’s self-appointed watchdogs. If a chapel speaker or teacher said something that was slightly off, we sounded the alarm. We’d email administrators, and warn others. We were zealous. And we were alarmed when people didn’t articulate the Christian faith with precision and clarity.

So what are the marks of an authentic Christian? Put differently, we might ask, *“how can we know that God is present in someone’s life?”* *“How can I know he is present in my life?”*

Over the past few months, we’ve been studying the book of First John. And in one sense, John writes this letter to answer these questions. He writes toward the close of the first century; a time when most people were religious. As the message of Christ spread across the Roman Empire, people came into the church. They believed themselves to be Christians, but still held tightly to their old religions and philosophies. They used Christian language, but they didn’t mean the same things that Christians meant. And the message of Christianity was in danger of being assimilated into the Roman smorgasbord of religions. John was the last living apostle. He knew Jesus personally. And he writes this letter to distinguish authentic Christianity from its counterfeits. In this passage, John elaborates on this idea. He gives two further marks of an authentic Christian. And he offers two proofs of God’s presence in a person’s life.

If you have a Bible, turn to 1 John 4:13-15. Last week, we studied verse 12. John says, *“...if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us”* (v. 12). According to John, our love for one another demonstrates two things; first that God dwells among us. And second, that his love is perfected – or brought to completion – within us. Mutual love reveals that God is present in our lives. And it demonstrates that God’s love is accomplishing its intended purpose within us. In the remainder of chapter 4, John elaborates on each of these

points.¹ In verses 13-16, he discusses God's presence. And in verses 17-21, he describes the effect of God's love; the effect it should have within us. This week, we'll focus on verses 13-15. Twice in this passage, John refers to God abiding in us, and of us abiding in God. This passage is about God's presence in our lives; and specifically, how we can know that he is present. John offers two proofs of God's presence within us. The first proof is our experience of the Spirit. And the second is our confession of the Son. Authentic Christians experience the Spirit. And they confess the Son.

1. Experiencing the Spirit: Christians experience the Spirit. In verse 13, John says, "*By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.*" (1 John 4:13).

Last week, I talked about the Father and the Son. We learned of their eternal love for one another, and how they share that love with us. But I neglected to say much about the Spirit. And sadly, the Spirit has often been neglected. The Holy Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity. But he's often treated like the third wheel of the Trinity. We know he's related to the Father, and the Son. But we struggle to understand him. He's mysterious. He's *spirit-y*. And our struggle is understandable. We have fathers. Some of us have sons. Some of us are both fathers and sons. In any case, we understand family dynamics. And – for better or for worse – our families shape our understanding of the Father, and his Son. But the Spirit is more difficult to comprehend. Nevertheless, it is vital that we know who he is, and what he does. The Spirit is fully God. He shares one life with the Father, and the Son. And he is God's active presence; both in the world, and in us.² God creates the world by the Spirit. And by the Spirit, he creates new life in us; he makes us responsive to him. And the New Testament teaches that our experience of God is always tied to the Holy Spirit. John says that we know God is present in our lives because of his work.

Now, that sounds exciting. But what does the Holy Spirit do? How can we discern his work in our lives? The Holy Spirit works in numerous ways. There are dozens of relevant passages we could look at. This morning, I'll just mention two activities of the Spirit; two functions he performs in our lives.

First, the Holy Spirit *assures*. He gives us tangible, heart-felt assurance of God's love. There's a difference between knowing something in your head, and knowing it in your gut. Isn't there? When you learn that a loved one has terminal cancer, you acknowledge it in theory. But inevitably, you reach a point when this reality hits you like a ton of bricks; when you're overcome by grief. When we found out that Keshelle was pregnant with Addie, I knew it was a big deal. But it was a theoretical big deal. But the reality of it didn't hit me for a few months. One night, I felt a surge of adrenaline. I sat up in bed, and realized, "*I'm going to be a dad. Are*

¹ So John R.W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, rev. ed. (TNCT: Leicester, UK: IVP, 1988); 167.

² Grudem, 634.

you kidding me? What am I doing with my life? I need to get my act together!" The Spirit takes our intellectual awareness of God's love, and brings it down to gut-level.

In Romans 5, Paul says that God pours his love into our hearts by the Spirit. The Holy Spirit enables us to cry out to God as "*Abba*." That's an intensely warm and intimate word. It connotes God's Fatherly affection for us. It's the word Jesus uses to address God. In Romans 8, Paul says that by the Spirit, we cry out, "*Abba, Father!*" But in Galatians 4, Paul says that the Spirit cries "*Abba*" through us! So apparently, the Spirit helps us realize how God much God loves us, and cry out to him in response. Only the Spirit can give us such a profound awareness of God's affection for us. And if we relate to God in this way, it's a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work in us.

Occasionally, I'm struck by the love of God. And to me, it's incredible. I'm fairly analytical; I'm overly-critical. And my emotions are not easily swayed. I'm the guy who doesn't cry when everyone else is crying. And I feel bad; like I'm a robot or something. And sadly, I can be pretty cynical as well. But thankfully, God finds ways to bypass my cynicism, and impress his love upon my heart.

Several months ago, Kshelle and I were at her parent's church. We're sitting in the Sunday service. We're listening to the sermon. The pastor is preaching on God's Fatherly love. And he really wants us to get it; to experience this love. He's into it. He's getting emotional. The congregation is getting emotional. My wife is getting emotional. But I'm not. And I'm resistant. Sometimes, I'm not the easiest person to sit next to during a sermon. Have you ever watched a movie with a film major? It's similar to that. Preachers like to add commentary. So I'm making comments to her; needlessly nitpicky and inane comments. The Holy Spirit can barely get a word in edgewise. The people around me are experiencing a catharsis. But I feel emotionally manipulated. It was sad, really. But then, the preacher said something like this; "*Your love for your children is just a pale reflection of God's love for you.*" And... that didn't affect me much either.

But it got me thinking about my kids. I can't quantify my love for Addie and Jake. I would do anything for my kids. And I would never give up one of my children for someone else. Never. But in Romans 8:32, Paul says that God has done just that; "*He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?*" I would never give you either of my children. God gave us his only Son. What more can he do to show you his affection? That thought is softening my heart. It's making God's love real to me. And only the Spirit could cause this to happen. Only he can give us heartfelt knowledge of God's love. But it's something he desires to do. So if you feel cold or callous, pray for his help. Say, "*Spirit, help me to call God, "Abba" and mean it! Cry this out through me. Awaken my heart to the reality of God's affection for me.*" The Spirit assures us that we're God's children. I want each of you to experience that at gut-level. His assuring work is proof that God is actively present in our lives.

The Holy Spirit assures. And he also *empowers*. Christians have a supernatural power-source. The Spirit empowers us to defeat sin, to serve the church and to tell others about Jesus. And when we act in faith, the Holy Spirit shows up.

In Matthew 10, Jesus sends his followers out to preach the gospel. And before sending them out, he gives the most terrifying motivational speech in history. He says, *“ok disciples, listen up. I’m sending you out as sheep in the midst of the wolves. People will malign you. People won’t like you. They’ll take you to court. And powerful men will arrest you. They will put on you trial. And then, they’ll flog you with whips.”* Pretty motivational, huh? This is not what you’re supposed to say during the pre-game pep-talk. But, then Jesus says something even crazier. He says, *“oh, but don’t worry about these things. Have no fear.” “Don’t worry? Are you kidding me, Jesus?” You give me every reason to worry, and then you tell me not to worry?! Zuh?”* Jesus says the disciples shouldn’t worry! Why? Because the Holy Spirit will go with them. Jesus says the Spirit will give his disciples supernatural boldness and wisdom; even in the face of intense opposition.

The Spirit empowers us to tell others about Christ. Just before Jesus ascends to heaven, he says to his followers, *“...you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.”* (Acts 1:8) And then Jesus leaves. And this is exactly what happens. The Holy Spirit falls on the disciples, and they begin boldly telling others about Christ.

The Holy Spirit empowers God’s people. And it’s another evidence of God’s activity in our lives. God doesn’t need extraordinary people to accomplish his purposes. He just needs dependent people; people who plead for him to work, and then obey. I’m often surprised by Spirit’s work in my life. I’ve said things that seem eloquent, and persuasive, and well-reasoned. And they’ve had no discernible impact on people. And I’ve also said things that are stupid and awkward and embarrassing. But the Holy Spirit has used them to minister to people. Every once in awhile, a guy I’ve mentored will share something I taught him. And I often think, *“When did I say that?”* Apparently, God used me at some point, often in spite of my best intentions. The Holy Spirit is with us. He empowers us for ministry. The question is this; will we act like this is true? Will we trust that the Holy Spirit is working, and respond in obedience?

Several weeks ago, I was having coffee with a local pastor. He shared a story that I’d like to share with you. He wanted to see lives transformed; to see people come to Jesus. And so, he gathered a dozen people around him. These people agreed to simplify their lives. They committed to investing in each other. And they committed to living as missionaries to their friends, and co-workers. They prayed for people. They loved people. They ate with people. They invited them into their community. And they shared about Jesus. And in one year, 19 people came to Christ through this small group. *19 people*. This didn’t require some brilliant strategic initiative. This wasn’t a well-funded program. And this didn’t happen in some part of the developing world. Ordinary people lived life with extraordinary intentionality. And the Holy

Spirit showed up. He moved; he saved people. The Holy Spirit gives us supernatural power. Do you believe that? Do you live like that's true? If you're in small group, don't you want to experience that? Who are you praying for? What are you asking the Spirit to do? Who are you asking him to save? And what are you doing in response? Are you reaching out to people with the expectation that God will do something? We aren't adequate. We don't have the wisdom, or the eloquence, or the love to convince anyone to trust in Jesus. But the Spirit is adequate. And when we step out, he moves. And this demonstrates God's active presence in our lives.

2. Confessing the Son: We experience God by the Spirit. This is one proof of God's presence in our lives. But John says there's another proof of God's presence. And it is equally important. True Christians experience the Spirit. But they also confess the Son. John goes on to say,

"And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. ¹⁵ Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God." (1 John 4:14-15)

In this letter, John always relates the work of the Spirit to the message of Jesus. In chapter 5, he says the Spirit testifies to the truth of Christ. In chapter 3, he says that we possess the Spirit. Then, in chapter 4, he describes how the Spirit enables us to discern truth from error. The Holy Spirit gives us more than a subjective experience of God. He also convinces us that the Christian message is true. And Jesus says the same thing. In John's gospel, he says,

"But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me" (John 15:26).

Jesus says the Spirit will testify about him. The Spirit guides our hearts to Jesus. He helps us to believe in Christ's person and work. And this explains why John mentions the Spirit in verse 13, and the Christian message in verse 14. It's the Spirit who corroborates John's testimony about Jesus. He persuades us that Jesus really did live, and die and rise again.

And in John's day, this is precisely what some were denying. John is writing to a church in turmoil. Some people have abandoned John's teaching, and left the church. But now, they're trying to reenter the Christian community. And they're introducing a new kind of teaching. They're excited about spiritual experiences. But they're diminishing the person and work of Jesus. It appears they deny key elements of the Christian message. They deny that Jesus is the unique Son of God; that he took on our humanity; and that he died as a sacrifice for our sins. But John maintains that such denials are disastrous. They reveal that these people aren't authentic Christians, regardless of the incredible spiritual experience they're having.

John draws our attention to the life of Christ. He says, *"we have seen and testify."* Remember, John is the last living apostle. He spent three years with Jesus. And he speaks on behalf of the other apostles. *"We were with Jesus"*, John says. These words hearken back to the beginning of this letter. In his introduction, John states,

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life –² the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us –³ that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you...” (1 John 1:1-3).

The false teachers played up their spiritual experiences. But they downplayed Jesus. In response, John says, *“We saw him. We touched him. We heard him. And we testify that he is the Savior.”* John was with Jesus. But John thinks Jesus is more than a historical figure. Jesus is God’s Son. And the Father sent this Son to be our Savior. This is what John thinks. In fact, he doesn’t merely think this; he *“testifies”* that it’s so. John puts himself under oath; he provides eyewitness testimony. He asks us to render a verdict.

And true Christians agree with John’s verdict. They confess that Jesus is God’s Son; that he took on our humanity; and that he died as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. If we confess this, it’s further evidence that God is present in our lives. Personal experience is necessary. But it’s not sufficient. If God is truly present in someone’s life, she will not only experience the Spirit. She will confess the Son. And she will hold accurate beliefs about him.

This is crucial for us to remember. Christianity isn’t fundamentally about a spiritual experience. It isn’t a philosophy of life, or a set of principles. Christianity is a message of what God has done in history through the person and work of Jesus Christ.

The first Christians didn’t testify about Jesus because they thought their message was palatable, or relevant. They weren’t promoting a path to self-actualization. They weren’t sharing principles for leading a successful life. They didn’t say, *“Everyone, listen up! We’ve spent time with a spiritual guru named Jesus. And then, we had a book club. And we’ve discovered some key principles for connecting to the divine. And we believe these principles will help you achieve your dreams and live a healthy life. So we’re hosting a seminar, and we’d love for you to come.”* No, the apostles said, *“we were with Jesus. You crucified him. But God raised him from the dead. And we are eyewitnesses. We believe that he has died for our sins, and that he is the true King of the world. And we believe it because he rose from the dead, and told us to.”* That was the message of the apostles.

Perhaps we struggle to see its relevance for today. But the truth is, it didn’t seem relevant then! The apostles went to both Jews and Greeks with this message of Jesus.

How did they respond to it? Well, the Jews believed in the resurrection of the body. But they saw it as a corporate event, which would occur at the end of time. Everyone would be resurrected at the end of history. But the Christians preached that one man had been raised in the *middle* of history. This idea was foreign to them. And the notion that God raised Jesus was even more preposterous. Jesus was a criminal. He acted against the religious establishment. He was an enemy of the state. He was another failed messiah, who broke religious and cultural boundaries. This message wouldn’t have played well with the Jews.

So what about the Greeks? What did they think of this message? Well, many Greeks scoffed at the very notion of resurrection. Many perceived the body as a cage for the soul. They understand salvation as the soul's liberation from the body. They wanted redemption *from* the body; not redemption *of* the body. In Acts 17, Paul preaches to a crowd of Greek philosophers. At first, it seems they're tracking with him. But suddenly, they begin to mock him. Why? Because he mentions the resurrection. That's when he loses them.

The early Christians proclaimed a message that was based on eyewitness testimony. They were testifying to an event; the death and resurrection of Christ. And they confessed it because they had encountered the risen Christ.

And this is something we must never forget. If we overemphasize Christian experience, we can minimize the importance of the Christian message. Every so often, I hear a statement like this; *"I know Jesus is alive, because he lives in my heart. And even if they found Jesus' body, it wouldn't affect my faith one bit."* All good intentions aside, I believe such statements are misguided. If Jesus' body is decomposing somewhere outside of Jerusalem, Christianity is a sham. Jesus came to undo the consequences of sin. He came to redeem *this* creation. If he hasn't personally defeated death, then death has not been defeated. Thankfully, Christ is risen. And we have excellent reasons for believing that this is so.

Our faith is rooted in the life of Christ. And this should affect the way we share our faith with others.

Sharing our personal testimonies is important. We should be able to explain how Jesus has changed our lives. And it's also important that we live changed lives. These things testify to the truth of our message. But my fear is that we do these things, yet fail to mention the content of our faith; the person and work of Christ. It's true that no one can argue with a changed life. But all sorts of people have experienced all sorts of changes, based on all sorts of subjective, spiritual experiences. Most people have had some kind of compelling personal experience. At some point, we must point people away from our lives to the life of Christ. And we must explain that our faith is rooted in history.

Here's one way to do this. If you want to explain your faith to someone, I'd suggest taking them to 1 Corinthians 15. In verses 1-8, Paul articulates the message of Christianity. He gives a brief summary of the gospel; Christ died, he was buried, and he rose again. But he says something else that's very interesting. In verse 3, Paul says he *received* this message from other Christians. Paul wrote 1 Corinthians sometime around 55 A.D. But he says that the message of Christianity was passed down to him. Jesus died some twenty years before this letter was written. Here's what this means; very shortly after Christ's death, people were proclaiming that he rose from the dead. And they were formally transmitting this message to others. I like this passage, because it connects our faith to the testimony of the earliest Christians. And it raises a number of interesting questions. *"How did the early Christians come to believe these things?"* *"What would have led them to adopt this radical new worldview?"* *"Why did they proclaim this*

message so confidently?" Hopefully, sharing your faith in this way directs people back to Jesus. You might not be able to every answer question people raise. That's ok. Don't give answers that you don't have. But hopefully you can initiate a conversation about the content of the gospel message itself, and that your faith is tethered to the testimony of the earliest Christians.

Christians experience the Spirit. They also trust in Jesus. In verse 15, John says we *confess* that Jesus is the Son of God. In the New Testament, confession is often a public act. The word generally denotes a public acknowledgement of something, or someone. And it appears that John is referring to the moment of confession; the point at which someone publicly affirms their trust in Christ. I think we can draw another application from this. And I hope it's an encouragement to you.

In the New Testament, people publicly acknowledge their faith in Christ by being baptized. We don't believe that baptism saves you. We don't think it has any intrinsic ability to change you, or give you new life. Nevertheless, we believe that Christ commands us to demonstrate our allegiance to him by being baptized (see Matthew 28:19-20). Baptism is tied to the moment of conversion. It's supposed to mark the starting point of the Christian life.

So, if you haven't been baptized, don't delay. We are excited to baptize you. And once you've indicated you're ready, we'll look for an opportunity to do it. But maybe you're unsure. May you don't know if you're ready. Well, if that's you, here are two ways to tell if you're ready. First, if you tell other people you're a Christian, you're ready to be baptized. You've already gone public with your faith. You should go public through baptism. Second, if you're comfortable taking communion, you're definitely ready to be baptized. Baptism is how we *initially* identify with Christ, and his people. Communion is how we *continually* identify with Christ and his people. You should take baptism just as seriously as you take communion. So, if you don't have a problem taking communion, you shouldn't have any problem being baptized. And my prayer is that your baptism would strengthen your faith, and give you further assurance of God's presence in your life.

III. Gospel: God dwells among us. He is actively present in our lives. We know this because we experience the Spirit, and because we confess the Son. And my prayer is that God's Spirit would draw you to God's Son this morning. If you're intrigued by Jesus; if you are perturbed by him, or amused by him, or annoyed by him, don't stop there. Jesus didn't claim to be a religious guru, or a wise man. He claimed to be the Son of God, sent to save us from sins. And the early Christians believed he rose from the dead, and that this validated all of Christ's claims. We confess that Jesus lived the life we were meant to live, but haven't, so that God could credit us with his righteousness. And we confess that Jesus died the death we deserved to die, bearing God's judgment against our sins. And we confess that three days later, he rose from the dead, defeating death, so that this creation could be liberated from sin, and so that we could be restored to God. You if you confess this Son, you'll experience his Spirit. And you'll know God's

Fatherly love and care for you; you'll know it in your gut. But even if you're not ready to make that confession, continue asking questions. And don't hesitate to talk to me, or any of the other leaders here about it. We want to talk with you. Let's pray.

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