



Vital Christianity: An Overview of 1 John

I. INTRO

- A. On January 15, 1933, Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered a sermon entitled "Overcoming Fear" in a Berlin church.¹
1. Here is an illustration that Bonhoeffer used: "Let's say there is a ship on the high sea, having a fierce struggle with the waves. The storm wind is blowing harder by the minute. The boat is small, tossed about like a toy; the sky is dark; the sailors' strength is failing. Then one of them is gripped by...whom? what?...he cannot tell...But someone is there in the boat who wasn't there before...Suddenly he can no longer see or hear anything, [he] can no longer row, a wave overwhelms him, and in final desperation he shrieks: 'Stranger in this boat, who are you?' And the [stranger] answers, 'I am Fear...All hope is lost, Fear is in the boat.'" -- Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Overcoming Fear*, 1933
 2. Germany was in the midst of some turbulent times.
 - a. The devastation of defeat from WW I was just 14 years earlier.
 - b. The Stock Market Crash of 1929 compounded pressure on the struggling German economy.
 - c. The government lacked political stability and leadership, and the fear of communism were almost palatable.
 3. An up-and-coming leader took interest in this dire situation. But rather than help people overcome their fears, he sought to exploit their fears for his own personal gain – and he offered himself as a savior.
 4. Just two weeks after Bonhoeffer's sermon, the country made Adolf Hitler their Chancellor. (And Bonhoeffer's great prophetic and pastoral instincts were revealed.)

¹ Adapted from an article by Ryan Hoselton entitled, "Bonhoeffer's Answer to Political Turmoil: Preach!" *Christianity Today*, Dispatch 3, May 2016.

5. As Bonhoeffer warned, but could have never foreseen, fear drove Germany—and millions of others—into the deepest pain, division, and despair the world had ever known.
- B. Students of history will notice a continual pattern of the rise and fall of nations and empires. It goes back to Cain and Abel.
- C. “[History is] the long and terrible story of [people] trying to find something other than God which will make [us] happy...Terrific energy is expended - civilizations are built up - excellent institutions devised; but each time something goes wrong. Some fatal flaw always brings the selfish and the cruel people to the top and it all slides back into misery and ruin.” --C.S. Lewis² [Are you glad you came today? ☺]
- D. Fortunately the Apostle John has an answer to this seemingly **bleak and repeated** pattern – and it is found in his first letter to the churches in Asia Minor – what we refer to as “The First Epistle of John.”
- E. Someone might ask, “How can a letter written over 1,900 years ago help us live in the 21st century?”
1. We are going to take the rest of the Spring and Summer to answer that question (with some weekends off for guest speakers along the way).
 2. There is a downloadable study guide on the website for personal study and for Life Group dialogue. The study guide also has a set of questions for each day of the week to interact with your children (or grandchildren).
 3. There is also a bible study tool in the study guide as well as some thoughts on Christian meditation.
- F. We will begin at the end of the letter today to launch our introduction to 1 John. Good authors will usually summarize their thoughts at the end of an essay.
- G. Please turn to 1 John 5:19 as I provide some background information...
1. 1 John was written about 60 years after the resurrection of Jesus. John is now an old man and he writes with a grandfatherly tone – as we will see.

² *Mere Christianity*: 49.

2. John has a very different style of writing than Paul – or any of the other NT writers. John is more indirect in his writing and Paul is more direct.³
3. It has been said that John uses a circular style that can be confusing to some (and he's older now and can go off on a tangent for a moment).
4. John challenges us as readers with his repetition of similar themes over and over to emphasize the basic truths of a genuine and vital Christianity.
5. Some have likened John's circularity and repetition to a spiral (think drill bit) that first moves inward, penetrating deeper and deeper into the soul with the same themes and then spiraling outward, to impact the world around us.
6. However one views this spiraling pattern, John uses repetition as a means to accentuate the importance of the basic themes and to help his readers understand and remember them.
7. In the church (or churches) that he is writing to there had apparently been some kind of church split that he is addressing. John does not directly specify their beliefs, but rather combats the heresies mainly through a positive restatement of the fundamentals of the Christian faith.
8. The main heresy is thought to be Gnosticism. You can read more about it in the study guide.
9. *"I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock."* --Acts 20:29 [What is happening in Ephesus is most likely what Paul was talking about 30 years earlier...]

II. BODY

- A. ***"We know that we are of God, and that the whole world lies in the power of the evil one."*** --1 John 5:19 [pray]
- B. As I mentioned, this is a key and summarizing verse. The main theme, then, is two-fold (back to basics and vital Christianity):
 1. **That we know, really know, that we are of God.**
 2. **That the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.**
- C. Let's look at them one at a time:

³ Martyn Lloyd-Jones. *Life In Christ: Studies In 1 John*, Crossway 2002:14.

1. **That we know, really know, that we are of God.** [How do we know, really know, that we are of God?]
 - a. John has written this letter that Christians can REALLY, REALLY know that we have eternal life. While this is a very basic doctrine, I am always surprised at how many people are unsure of who they are in God – or, to use the language that John is using, *“that we are of God.”*
 - b. Let’s consider for a moment The doctrine of **assurance of salvation**:
 - 1) We begin by acknowledging that there is an objective aspect of our assurance, and there is a subjective aspect for our assurance. What does that mean? (Revelation & Illumination)
 - a) The objective aspect is the finished work of Christ on the cross. It is rooted in history.
 - b) The subjective aspect is our activated faith.
 - c) *“For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.”* --Hebrews 10:14
 - 2) There are two parts of our activated faith:
 - a) Faith is the spiritual awakening to the glory (or beauty) of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on the cross and through His resurrection.
 - i. For faith to be real there must be a supernatural “light” that God shines into the heart to show us that Jesus Christ IS glorious and wonderful.
 - ii. *“For God, who said, ‘Light shall shine out of darkness,’ is the One who has shone in our hearts to give the Light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ.”* --2 Corinthians 4:6
 - b) The second part of our activated faith is a “warranted resting” in this glorious gospel for our own salvation.
 - i. John Piper uses the term, “warranted resting” because there is also an “unwarranted resting” — people who think they are saved who are not, because They have never come to see the majesty of Christ as compellingly glorious.

- ii. There are people who only believe on the basis of wanting rescue from harm, not because they see Christ as more beautiful and desirable than all else.
- 3) I would also encourage every Christian to continually pray for God to, *“enlighten the eyes of our hearts”* (Ephesians 1:18).
- 4) In 1 John he tells us that the assurance of our faith will compel us to love one another: *“We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brethren”* --1 John 3:14

2. That the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

- a. Here is the essence of what John is saying (as well as the other NT writers): However much the world may change on the surface, it is – and will always be under the control of evil and sin.⁴
- b. That is why we see these repeating patterns throughout history...
- c. Here is what has helped me to understand this... *“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.”* --John 3:16
 - 1) So, God loves the world, God loves people. God loved rebels, fools, and idolaters so much that He gave His only Son, Jesus, to redeem us.
 - 2) What God HATES is the world system – of greed, usury, racism, manipulation, abuse, slavery, rape, poverty, pollution, inequality, the objectification of one another.
- d. Here’s how John says it in 1 John 2:15-17: *“Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. ¹⁶ For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life, is not from the Father, but is from the world. ¹⁷ The world is passing away, and also its lusts; but the one who does the will of God lives forever.”* --1 John 2:15-17
- e. The world system will never get better. The final outcome will be God’s judgment and destruction.

⁴ Lloyd-Jones: 20.

- f. Here's what John is telling Christians (paraphrased): We should not be surprised at the state of the world. (This crazy election cycle??) It's unconverted people doing what unconverted people do.
- g. So, how should we then live? Jesus prays: *"I have given them Your word; and the world has hated them, because they are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁵ I do not ask You to take them out of the world, but to keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; Your word is truth. ¹⁸ As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world."* --John 17:14-18

III. **CONCLUSION** [The following was NOT in the sermon this last weekend]

- A. I would like to conclude this introduction to 1 John by providing a diagnostic of our contemporary culture and provide a biblical mandate to serve and love the people but not the world "system."⁵
 - 1. First of all it is helpful to view the Church as a kind of mini-city within the larger city.
 - 2. The Bible identifies all Christians as exiles living in the larger dominant culture ("*strangers*" or "*foreigners*" in 1 Peter 1:1 and 1 Peter 1:17 and "*aliens and strangers*" in 1 Peter 2:11).
 - 3. We are called to reflect the values of God's kingdom while living in the larger dominant culture. This is exactly what John is addressing in both John 17 and in 1 John.
- B. The values of the KOG will never be the values of the surrounding dominant culture.
 - 1. In our western contemporary culture THE building block THE supreme value is the individual self.
 - 2. We live in a culture of self-assertion, of self-definition. A culture that says the individual self should only be in a relationship as long as it is personally fulfilling.
 - 3. Communities (and churches) are in crisis in the western world because of the individualism that prevails.

⁵ The writing and preaching of Tim Keller has helped to inform my conclusions.

C. The Christian understanding is to be very different. Why? Because so many of God's values are shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ.

1. In every relationship – whether it's in the larger community or in a spousal relationship, if everyone is saying, "Me first" relationships will constantly be blowing up.
2. Marriage is the most intense of all human relationships, if one or both partners in a marriage are saying, "Me first" the marriage will deeply struggle and it will probably die.
3. But if each spouse is saying "You first" (your needs are more important than mine); my life for yours, then the marriage is in for many years of richness and joy.

D. Here's the gospel: Jesus Christ came into the world saying, "You first" / "My life for yours."

1. When that message becomes our core practice we will see a whole different kind of culture (society).
2. The basis of the kingdom of God is not personal advancement and accruing personal happiness and power, it's actually self-renunciation, self-denial, self-sacrifice, serving other people, and doing justice.

E. Let's consider sex and money as examples (as we close):

1. Sex – In Christianity sex is the only way to give yourself completely – it's one of the most important ways to say, "You first." It's the way to say, "I want to give you my whole life!" "I want to be physically, economically, legally, and emotionally – in every other way, one with you.
2. Money – In the KOG ALL the money is God's, none of it is ours. That will change completely our attitude toward money.

F. Life looks radically different inside the KOG. How do we do this? That is exactly what John is addressing in his letter...

G. Next week: How to have a full and lasting joy.

P.A.S.S. Questions For Further Reflection and For KHC Life Groups

P - Participation (get everyone involved in the dialog)

1. Have you ever had a moment when you experienced the presence of God? If so, briefly share what happened.

A - Application (makes it personal)

2. 1 John 2:17 tells us the world is “*passing away.*” What are some implications of this for our personal lives?

S - Scripture (thinking biblically is a learned behavior! :-)

3. Assurance of salvation involves both objective and subjective aspects of faith. What are they?
4. Read Romans 8:15-16. What is the connection between “adoption” and assurance?

S – Sharing (aim for a time of honest reflection, authenticity, and transparency in a safe atmosphere modeled by you).

5. Who in the room is seeking to have a greater experience of assurance? Pray for them. Pray for revival at KHC and throughout the South Bay.