

## The Basic Characteristics of Christianity

### Study in 1 John - Read 1 John 1:1-4

In a world where values, morals and even religion is changing, what is real Christianity? What do real Christians do? What describes the normal Christian life?

True Christianity is summed up in one main concept, **Fellowship with God**. This is a partnership with God through a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It's not a relationship with an organization, a church, a denomination or any other group. It is a personal relationship with Jesus. The word, "Christian" simply means "little Christ," or a "Follower of Christ." It was first used in Acts 11:26 to describe the followers of Jesus who had come from Jerusalem to Antioch after persecution started when Stephen was killed for his faith. The people of Antioch called believers this because they were acting just like Jesus did. They, in essence, were "Little Christs." As a Christian we don't follow an organization or even another human being. A true Christian is a FOLLOWER OF JESUS CHRIST!

So, as a follower of Jesus Christ, what should my life look like? The book of 1 John was written to remind believers what true Christianity was. In this study, we will go through the letter known as, 1 John, and uncover the basic characteristics of Christianity.

In this first lesson, we will explore the background of the letter. Who wrote it? Why was it written? Who was it written to? What were the circumstances at that time that prompted the letter? An understanding of these things will shed light on the principles John wrote about and why.

#### INTRODUCTION:

This background & introduction to the book of 1 John is taken from John MacArthur's Study Bible (ESV).

"Although he was greatly advanced in age when he penned this epistle, John was still actively ministering to churches. He was the sole remaining apostolic survivor who had intimate, eyewitness association with Jesus throughout his earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. The church Fathers (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius) indicate that after that time, John lived at Ephesus in Asia Minor, carrying out an extensive evangelistic program, overseeing many of the churches that had arisen, and conducting an extensive writing ministry (e.g., epistles, the Gospel of John, and Revelation). One church Father (Papias) who had direct contact with John described him as a "living and abiding voice." As the last remaining apostle, John's testimony was highly authoritative among the churches. Many eagerly sought to hear the one who had first-hand experience with the Lord Jesus.

Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10) lay within the intellectual center of Asia Minor. As predicted years before by the apostle Paul (Acts 20:28-31), false teachers arising from within the church's own ranks, saturated with the prevailing climate of philosophical trends, began infecting the church with false doctrine, perverting fundamental apostolic teaching. These false teachers advocated new ideas that eventually became known as "Gnosticism" (from the Greek word "knowledge"). After the Pauline battle for freedom from the law, Gnosticism was the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first three centuries. Most likely, John was combating the beginnings of this virulent heresy that threatened to destroy the fundamentals of the faith and the churches (see Interpretive Challenges).

Gnosticism, influenced by such philosophers as Plato, advocated a dualism asserting that matter was inherently evil and spirit was good. As a result of this presupposition, these false teachers, although attributing some form of deity to Christ, denied his true humanity to preserve him from evil. It also claimed elevated knowledge, a higher truth known only to

those in on the deep things. Only the initiated had the mystical knowledge of truth that was higher even than the Scripture.

Instead of divine revelation standing as judge over man's ideas, man's ideas judged God's revelation (1 John 2:15-17). The heresy featured two basic forms. First, some asserted that Jesus' physical body was not real but only "seemed" to be physical (known as "Docetism" from a Greek word that means "to appear"). John forcefully affirmed the physical reality of Jesus by reminding his readers that he was an eyewitness to him ("heard," "seen," "touched," "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh"—1:1-4 4:2-3). According to early tradition (Irenaeus), another form of this heresy that John may have attacked was led by a man named Cerinthus, who contended that the Christ's "spirit" descended on the human Jesus at his baptism but left him just before his crucifixion. John wrote that the Jesus who was baptized at the beginning of his ministry was the same person who was crucified on the cross (5:6). Such heretical views destroy not only the true humanity of Jesus, but also the atonement, for Jesus must not only have been truly God, but also the truly human (and physically real) man who actually suffered and died upon the cross, in order to be the acceptable substitutionary sacrifice for sin (cf. Heb. 2:14-17). The biblical view of Jesus affirms his complete humanity as well as his full deity.

The Gnostic idea that matter was evil and only spirit was good led to the idea that either the body should be treated harshly, a form of asceticism (e.g., Col. 2:21-23), or sin committed in the body had no connection to or effect on one's spirit. This led some, especially John's opponents, to conclude that sin committed in the physical body did not matter; absolute indulgence in immorality was permissible; one could deny sin even existed (1 John 1:8-10) and disregard God's law (3:4). John emphasized the need for obedience to God's laws, for he defined the true love of God as obedience to his commandments (5:3).

A lack of love for fellow believers characterizes false teachers, especially as they react against anyone rejecting their new way of thinking (3:10-18). They separated their deceived followers from the fellowship of those who remained faithful to apostolic teaching, leading John to reply that such separation outwardly manifested that those who followed false teachers lacked genuine salvation (2:19). Their departure left the other believers, who remained faithful to apostolic doctrine, shaken. Responding to this crisis, the aged apostle wrote to reassure those remaining faithful and to combat this grave threat to the church. Since the heresy was so acutely dangerous and the time period was so critical for the church in danger of being overwhelmed by false teaching, John gently, lovingly, but with unquestionable apostolic authority, sent this letter to churches in his sphere of influence to stem this spreading plague of false doctrine." (*MacArthur Study Bible Notes on 1 John* by John MacArthur)

Several observations from this introduction that I believe are important for us to know:

1. John the Apostle wrote the book:
  - a. He was in the inner circle with Jesus. (Peter, James, John). This meant he was as close to Jesus as anyone.
  - b. He was with Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and at the cross. He was with Jesus in the most critical moments of his earthly life.
  - c. He sat next to Jesus at the last supper. This indicated he was a close confidant of Jesus.
  - d. He was the only living Apostle at the time of the writing of 1 John. This was important because of the challenge by the Gnostics that Jesus was not really God in the flesh and that a personal relationship with Jesus was not important since matter was inherently evil. This is why John spend so much time in chapter one explaining that Jesus was a real person that John saw, heard, touched and spent time with.

- e. He lived in Ephesus in Asia Minor (modern day Turkey) which was a center for false religious teachings. It was also central to the church in Asia Minor. This letter was written as a document to be read by all the churches not just one.
2. Several Biblical truths were being challenged by false teachers, primarily the Gnostics. These truths became the topics of John's letter.
3. Christianity as they had known it was being threatened because of these false teachings and John had to make sure that the church was reminded of the basic truths of why Christianity existed in the first place which explained how Christians should live.

The following themes are prevalent in the book of 1 John:

- **Jesus is God in the flesh.** He was fully God and fully man. He was a real person that we can have a relationship with, just like John did.
- **Sin has been atoned for.** Jesus paid the price for our sin so that we could have this relationship with Him.
- **Holy living is a result of salvation.** Obedience to God's instruction about how to live life was important. The Gnostics, believing that matter is evil and spirit is good, tended to play down the affect of sin in the body on the spiritual life. John points out that true believers want to obey the commands of Jesus because of what Jesus did for us.
- **Loving others is a result of salvation.** As obedient followers of Jesus, John taught that the greatest way to show we are followers of Jesus is to have love for one another. This was a critical attitude change when one became a Christian.
- **We can have confidence in our relationship with God through Jesus.** True believers trusted in the work of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection and so were confident that they had been forgiven, and that Heaven would be their eternal home. This confidence is vital to the joyful life God intend for believers to live. Without it believers live in guilt and anxiety wondering if they are "truly saved" and right with God. A miserable way to live and not the kind of life Jesus came to provide for us.

**There are also three sub themes:** Happiness; Holiness; Security

**The following watch words are used several times in the book:** Fellowship; obedience; love; righteousness; joy; confidence

**The book presents to us the following formula for the Christian life:** Proper belief in Jesus (1 John 2:1-2) produces obedience (1 John 2:36) which generates love for God & others (1 John 2:5). This process results in a life of happiness (joy) (1 John 1:4), holiness (1 John 2:1) and security (1 John 2:5; 5:13). This is real Christianity !

With this background in mind, we will embark on our journey through the book of 1 John and learn from the Scripture what John describes as real Christianity: