

1 John 1:1–4

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[0 : 00] Well, good morning and a special welcome to you. I am so excited about today for many reasons. First of all, this is actually winter in Chicago.

And on a winter day, when you get this kind of weather and the Word of God before you, you have hit the trifecta in the Midwest.

So here we are. I am thrilled. And also because we opened the year with a series on getting a vision of Christ. And we are moving right out of that series on getting a vision of Christ to looking at a New Testament letter that brings its claim right from the beginning that we're listening to someone who walked and talked with him.

So if this year you have set the majesty of Jesus before you, you now turn your attention to a letter from one who claims to have walked among him and is concerned for your well-being.

What a wonderful day. Well, ours is a world with competing views. Competing views on everything, really. Let me just give you the world of music.

[1 : 15] For example, Adele or Beyonce? Beyonce! Or does Lady Gaga's voice have them both hands down?

Yes. How about Hollywood? La La Land? Or fences? Or Manchester by the Sea? How about sports?

The Patriots over anybody or anybody over the Patriots? How about science? Is human behavior the major cause of climate change?

Or is our human behavior merely incidental? How about politics? Is the Republican health care agenda going to be any better than the Democratic one?

Or would we all be better off staying with ACA? How about religion? Does the suicidal jihadist actually enter straightway into eternal life?

[2 : 15] Or is the one he or she martyrs by such acts more likely to go straight into the presence of God? Institutional religion. Is ultimate truth actually an adherence to the Torah?

Or are the Christian gospels instead the things we ought to follow? Or does truth actually reside in the Book of Mormon over and against them both? Truly, ours is a world with competing views. We compete on what constitutes the facts of things. We compete on the true nature of faith in things. We wonder what is falsehood among things.

And when it comes to religion, which is the gathering of this morning, when it comes to a consideration of knowing God, when it comes to things like faith, facts, falsehood about God or Jesus, well, the stakes are especially high.

Not only do we live in a day where we're in the midst of an onslaught of competing views, it has actually bred confusion on nearly every arena.

[3 : 31] How do we even know anymore, if we're not a specialist in a particular area, who we ought to be listening to? Religiously, what criteria would make me become a follower of Jesus?

On what grounds would I follow him or someone or something else? Perhaps the landscape of competing ideas accounts for why so many of us doubt almost everything and why so few of us have genuine assurance on anything.

Interestingly, though, the dilemma is not new. We think we live in a bubble where this has recently emerged. It's not unique to our time. In the apostolic age, as it was winding down, that is, when the first followers of Jesus were beginning to die off, that which constituted true faith was beginning to heat up.

There's considerable evidence that 1, 2, and 3 John is written in that milieu, right at that moment, when the competing views are rising because the accepted norms of a previous generation were dissipating.

In fact, within the letters themselves, these short little letters that really close off the end of the canon, letters that I've never preached through before, and I've been preaching for 30 years, these little known letters actually contain information in them that would let us know that the average man, the average woman, was caught in the middle of competing views.

[5 : 25] A divide was emerging. The previously accepted teaching of the first followers of Jesus was being challenged. Just take a look.

2, 19 of 1 John, you'll see this subtle interior hint. Quote, They went out from us, but they were not of us.

For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. In other words, some split is emerging in the church as the apostolic age is closing down.

Chapter 2, verse 26 will actually support this supposition. He says, I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.

You see, the writer, this eyewitness of the events, now toward the close of life, those teachings are being challenged.

[6 : 22] Indeed, people have left that church for another. And the average man or woman says, Well, do I stay or do I go? And what is it about Jesus or the Gospels that would incline me toward one view on God or another?

Given that historical situation and its connection to our own time, the introductory paragraph of 1 John is especially potent.

Just take a look. Chapter 1, verses 1 to 4 does two things I want to look at this morning. In verses 1 and 2, it will make an argument that the writer's understanding can be trusted above other views that are swirling.

An argument that the writer's understanding of things can be trusted above other views. And then verses 3 and 4 move from the argument to an appeal.

And the appeal is to assure the reader that if you remain with us, you will ultimately be rewarded with eternal life. Let's take a look at it along those headings.

[7 : 40] 1 and 2, he wants them to know that their faith is on solid ground in contrast to the other views that are out there. Let me put it differently. The argument is this.

In 1 and 2, in a world with competing notions on the truth, it is eyewitnesses that have an authoritative advantage over those who were not.

Let me read it. 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, 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.

The argument's there. In a world with competing notions of truth, the writer has picked up his pen and said one thing in these two verses. Don't forget, eyewitnesses have an authoritative advantage over those who were not.

It's a very sophisticated opening. He anchors his argument in what our own legal system values most. The authority of eyewitness testimony.

[9 : 02] It's tactile. That which we have heard. That which our eyes have seen. That which actually I touched concerning who this one was.

This word of life. Jesus. Those things have an advantage over the other views that are emerging. Three preliminary observations on those two verses.

One, just notice, it's an unconventional opening to a first century letter. I mean, it's situated here within the general letters of the New Testament canon, in distinction from the Pauline letters, but it's situated within the general epistles, but it is a very unconventional opening.

Especially for a letter in the first century. Normally, the prescript would contain the name of the author, the names of the recipients, and a brief word of greeting. Here you have none of that.

Obviously, the writer must have been very well known by those to whom this letter was written. Which, when you read the letter throughout, you'll begin to see because you'll be reading it from now through Easter.

[10 : 14] He repeats this phrase that he believes the recipients are my little children. My children. My children. This has a familial sense that the individuals who are listening would have known immediately who it was.

And that's why the historical observations on the interpretation of the text have often connected this with the apostle John or those close to John because even the way it begins, that which was from the beginning.

And the language within this letter and the gospel has for centuries now had scholars wrestling with the relationship between the two. But this is unconventional in way of opening.

Second observation, the writer has a different way of establishing his authority than, say, the apostle Paul. I mean, look how the apostle Paul normally would open a letter.

The apostle Paul opens up with some... He's got some over-the-top bravado and need for authority.

[11:19] Let me just explain that or show that to you. Look at 2 Corinthians, which is a letter to a church at Corinth, and notice the way it opens. Verse 1, Paul, an apostle of Jesus by the will of God.

I mean, immediately, let me tell you who I am. I will make a claim to authority by telling you I am an apostle. You'll see the same thing in Paul when he's writing to the church at Galatia.

This, again, is a more standard prescript to a letter. Paul, he says, and look, right out of the gate, an apostle. And then he says, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

Paul has to situate himself as a legitimate authority. Why? Because Paul was born late in time. Paul knew that his credibility as an authoritative witness was by nature going to be more easily challenged than those first followers.

This is why, in some measure, he recounts in the New Testament time and time again his conversion story. Because he wants you to know, I saw him.

[12:37] He spoke to me. I've seen him in the flesh. He has to establish that. This writer, or writers in 1 John, because it says we, this apostolic band has no need to go out of its way to claim authority.

In fact, all the authority is laid down with this exquisite opening. 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.

The weight now rests with authority. Third observation. Not only is it unconventional, not only is it unlike the Apostle Paul, but I want you to know that this letter is perfectly situated for the way you and I want things to be.

In a world with competing views, you and I have one question to ask. What is it that makes a witness credible?

My uncle, one of my uncles is an attorney in New York City. I remember phoning him and asking him, because I'm not a student of law, Uncle John, let me know in your line of work, what is it that makes a witness credible?

[14:18] Well, his shorthand answer was, the jury. In other words, he's saying the jury will ultimately determine whether the witness was credible.

And I said, well, I know that. That sounds like asking my congregants who are coming on to following about Jesus whether or not they'll buy my arguments. At the end of the day, you will believe what I'm teaching you today or not.

You are the ultimate jury. That said, what is it that makes a witness credible? He went on and he gave me three things. One, personal knowledge as to the person or event in question.

Personal knowledge trumps everything on credibility. Second, personal character. Is the witness generally known to be truthful, honest?

Are they especially highly regarded? Are they even respected, especially by their detractors? See, this is why John the Baptist became such a credible first century witness to Jesus because he had all kinds of detractors but everyone knew that what John the Baptist said was honest, forthright, and could be trusted.

[15:24] He took down the high and the low. So his credibility as a witness rises. Not only personal knowledge as to the person or event in question or the character of the witness, but third, my uncle told me, personal liabilities.

Your past conduct can ruin you on the witness stand. This letter then is exactly the kind of witness you will need to know and you say you long for in determining whether the Christian faith is one you ought to follow.

because the writer has automatically in the first two verses laid all these things out. He claims to be a personal, to have personal knowledge as to the event in question.

His character, if it's John the Apostle or somebody close to him, was unquestioned in the first century. In fact, this letter has attestation in the canon as being uniquely from him by Polycarp, which goes as early as 150 A.D.

I mean, very early source documents are indicating that this is some authoritative word from the first eyewitnesses and Athanasius in his creed or his canon in 397.

[16:39] I John's already sitting there. This has great historical significance and weight. Then, how does this benefit you?

Let me ask you this. if you are wondering if Christianity, as taught by Holy Trinity Church, from this pulpit, week by week, ought to be what you attach your faith to.

Or if you are rightly questioning, and I know we have so many now that are walking in week by week having never studied the Bible, having probably never even read this letter from beginning to end before in your life, and if you are rightly questioning here, carving out time Sunday by Sunday to know whether you're getting the real deal, at least you know this, that the argument, you know the argument that this pulpit will make.

I will lean, and anyone who preaches from here will lean, their claim to the genuine faith, upon the backs of those who in this record claim to be eyewitnesses to the things that we teach and proclaim to you.

That's it. The authority of this pulpit does not rest with me, certainly not with my charisma. It rests simply with an inquiry to the source documents that claim somebody was there and knew something about what was taking place.

[18:26] Let me say a word further on this. You know, in a post-apostolic age, that is, when those first guys all died, we all wrestled with how do I know I'm connected to the real thing?

By what authority am I connected to that which is genuine? Now, the Roman Catholic Church will indicate that your connection to the authentic gospel is related to the teaching of the church and through the succession of the apostolic leader from Peter forward.

In other words, the genuine sense of authentic connection will be through the church itself and its teaching. the charismatic church, of which I also have half my roots are Pentecostal.

Amen? Amen. They will, and it's still a number of my family within even a word of faith movement, will say that my connection to the authentic gospel is related to the charismatic gifts that are given to me, the spirit or the faith that I represent in that.

Now, as laudable as those two frameworks are, my own view is simply this. My connection back to the apostolic authority rests neither in what the church will tell me or what my internal spirit will lead me, but rather on the documents of those who claim to have actually been witnesses!

[20:03] to the thing itself. Now, think about this. We all take these things by faith. You might meet someone that will say, I'm not a person of faith.

Well, that's not actually quite true. I mean, you take certain things by faith, things which you haven't seen, things which you haven't touched, things which you haven't actually looked at.

An example, you can take by faith, your faith can be on solid ground that William Rainey Harper was the founding president of the University of Chicago. Chicago. You weren't there a hundred and some years ago when it was founded.

You've never seen him, you've never heard him, but it's not a great leap of faith to trust the reliability of the documents that are in play that indicate to us that when Rockefeller put up the money to found the university, it was indeed William Rainey Harper, whose portrait hangs in Harper Library, who was the founding president.

Based on facts, it's based on records, based on eyewitness. Let me give you another example, something much nearer to time. I believe that our president held a rally yesterday in Florida.

[21:17] I wasn't there, and I didn't see it, and I haven't heard it, and I don't want to watch it, but at any rate, I believe that it happened. Why? Because I've read certain things already that indicate in a trustworthy way that that indeed did take place.

let me put it to you this way. There is not a great leap for you or me to believe in something, it takes no more evidence to believe in something that happened a hundred years ago, or two thousand years ago, than it does for you to believe in something that happened yesterday, if the criteria of your belief rests on the solid faith in accordance with facts of those who are actually there.

That's what 1 John is offering you this whole winter. clear. The claim is clear. Eyewitnesses, he says, have an argumentative advantage in declaring what is true over those who were not. And so these opening verses put us right where we need to be. With all the competing views on Jesus, with all the competing views on morality, with all the conversation on who's in good with God and who is not, we get to look at one who claims to walk with him.

He says it's life. He calls him the word of life. He says he appeared. Not only did he appear, he appeared to us. Notice the pronouns in those opening verses.

[23 : 01] Our eyes, our hands manifested to us. That which we have seen, we have heard. There it is.

But what about verses three and four? If the argument in one and two connects faith to facts that he thinks can be trusted for those who will be living after the original followers are gone, then what are three and four doing?

Let me read it again. That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you so that you too may have fellowship with us and indeed our fellowship was with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ and we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

If one and two indicate to the reader that your faith is on solid ground, then three and four are an appeal that your fellowship with God is secure if you remain in fellowship with us.

Let me put it to you differently. Retaining fellowship with the eyewitnesses and their message is the very thing that assures us as readers that we have fellowship with God.

[24 : 44] Let's get it even cleaner. You're asking the question this morning, how can I know that I am in good with God? God?

How can I be sure or reassured that I know God? Particularly in a world with unending views. the writer here is clear. You need to retain fellowship with this eyewitness account for in doing so you actually share in fellowship with Christ.

That's his aim. It's his aim for the whole letter. What's 1 John about? Or let me put it differently.

You're going to go home today and go, well, I went to church today. Some of you might even call your parents, well, I went to church today.

First time in years actually. Oh, really? Why'd you go to church for? Well, I don't know, but I went.

And anyway, it's curious. I'm going to go back because they're going to be wrestling for the next few weeks on how I can know whether or not I actually know God.

[25 : 57] That's the aim of the letter. He wants us to have fellowship with God. And he connects our fellowship with God to our fellowship with the eyewitnesses and their message.

Take a look at the end of the letter. It's stated again just to make sure that you don't miss it. Chapter 5, verse 13, I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that, here's the purpose, that you may know that you have eternal life.

He's writing so that you can know something, really know something. In other words, if the academic enterprise is to remain in doubt on all things for all time, this writer is challenging the supposition.

This writer says the goal in life is not to remain in a state of doubt all through life. The goal of life is to know God. To land with some reasonable faith, not unreasonable, and the reasonableness of my faith is related to the facts and the facts depend on the credibility of the witnesses and he says that's what I want for you more than anything else.

You find the same thing even further in the letter. This thing about his aim. Look at the very last verses. Verse 20, That's the concern of the writer for the coming weeks for you and me.

[27 : 40] He wants us to know God and he wants us to know whether or not we know God. He's tired of a church in the midst of competing views that languishes in doubt.

Let me put it to you cleanly as we close. This guy seems to be a guy who says this, quote, I got hold of something really good a while back called Jesus.

called the word of life. I don't know how, but I got hold of him. And it is so good that I want you to have what I have, because I know that if you have what I have, you're going to have fellowship with God.

God love you love you love you to have you love you to give you assurance in a world with competing views.

So it's going to be perfect for Christians and non-Christians alike here this morning. If you're a Christian, there's lots of reasons perhaps to doubt whether or not you really are a Christian.

[28 : 58] Well, we're going to see what Christians really look like. if you're not a Christian, you need to come back because you're going to see what one really looks like.

The applicability of the letter is already displayed even in the opening. In fact, the appeal is already hitting on one of your deepest desires. The word fellowship, communion, being part of something that's larger than ourselves.

It's actually being connected to something truthful and right. and good and healthy. Imagine, imagine, fellowship on the grandest of scales, fellowship with God, knowledge of God, knowing God.

All in a world that is competing in its views. First John is written to give you a faith that is reasonable, a faith that is secure. In one sense, it will also test our faith.

It will test our life. it will look for the signs that demonstrate we actually possess the real thing. I'm excited.

[30 : 12] I want to know. I want to know what the eyewitnesses have to say about life, particularly in a world where I'm confused given the competition of views.

Our Heavenly Father, as we now this year take this next journey together in getting a vision of Christ, we move from these visions in Revelation where He is resurrected and reigning and returning and inviting and we move to a vision that's tactile and one filled with senses.

Thank you for this letter with its claims to come from those who walked with Jesus. Help us in the study of it to know whether or not we can have fellowship with them and thereby with you.

In Jesus' name, Amen.