

Life In A First Century Church - 1

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Date: 16 June 2019

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[0 : 0 0] Please to the passage of scripture we read 2nd John and looking at the whole of the chapter the message of this very short epistle this short letter the elder to the elect lady and her children whom I love and truth and not I only but also all who know the truth because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever grace mercy and peace will be with us from God the father and from Jesus Christ the father son in truth and love. Many commentators take it that the references here to the elect lady and then finally at the verse 13 the children of your elect sister greet you are actually coded references to a church and that in those days when John was near the end of his apostolic life on earth that matters had got dangerous for them to actually identify Christians in certain places either individually or as groups and therefore this is one way that they would have got rounded by writing as if it were to an individual woman as a representation really of the church that he was writing to so the elder to the elect lady and her children would be to a group of Christians. Now that may not be the case. Many commentators, many reliable commentators take it that that's what it means but it may well have been just to an individual Christian woman and her family in a certain context and for one reason or another he didn't want to name her such. I prefer the view that it is to a certain group of Christians because throughout the body of the letter it makes more sense I think if you look at it what he's saying that it be to a group of Christians. Verse 8 for example, watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we have worked for. In other words that's more appropriate I feel to a group of Christians to watch themselves, to look after each other, to look after carefully the life they're living as Christians rather than just that be to an individual woman with her family, the children.

In any case whatever we make of it, it's a letter that has so much in it to teach us about a Christian context but especially life if you like in a first century church and we're looking at that God willing this evening as we turn to third John just as a balance or a follow-up to this one.

So we are looking at life in a first century church whether this is to the church itself or to an individual woman is still within the context of the first century church in the times of the apostle John just nearing the end of his life as an apostle. And life in that first century church is very much set out by him in the framework of truth and love. You can see that that's really prominent in the opening terms of the letter and also right through it you find references to truth and love.

Not in a way that separates them but in a way that shows that truth and love always coexist in a way that is helpful, in a way that is beneficial to Christians in every age, to every group of Christians, indeed to every individual Christian. Truth and love are supremely important and really provide the bedrock of God. The bedrock if you like on which our life is lived. Truth and love because in verse 3 that's exactly what you've got as a description of God. Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father, from Jesus Christ the Father, Son in truth and love. He's drawing us really to the depths of the Godhead, the depths of the Trinity itself. This wonderful mysterious reality of God, the one God, as three persons, the Father, the Son, the Holy Spirit, beyond our ability to understand all of the features of that, how exactly it is. But that's what the Bible reveals. That's what we know as God's truth revealed to us. That's what his being is like. Yet that is very much a Trinity itself that is characterized by truth and love. The Father's love for the Son, the Son's love for the Father.

And correspondingly, the Spirit's love of taking the truth and the love of God and making that cogent and clear to the world that we belong to. So there are three things from the letter we want to just highlight. First of all, what he calls walking in the truth. Secondly, walking in love. And thirdly, being watchful in truth and love. Walking in the truth, walking in love. And watchful in truth and love.

[5 : 08] You see, that's, as we said, what he's saying in verse 1. The elder to the elect lady, whom I love in truth. Not only I, but all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.

In other words, John is really saying, this is where the Christian life is grounded. This is where our life individually as Christians is grounded. This is where the life of God's church is grounded. It's in the truth of God, in the love of God, and in love for God. Grounded in the truth. Walking in the truth means you know truth being foundational to your life, being foundational to your very existence, and especially to your life as a Christian. Of course, God ultimately is ultimate truth. He is the truth from which all other expressions of the truth come to us. And that truth is revealed in Jesus through the gospel. It's revealed as the truth that is in Christ. Remember, we looked last Lord's Day at something of this, the importance of truth, and how God represents truth as a figure fallen in the streets. Going back to our study there of Isaiah chapter 66. One of the great tragedies in any age is to see truth having collapsed. We're taught here that truth begins with God, and what he reveals to us is truth. It's truth through Jesus Christ, in Jesus Christ, through the gospel. We go back, for example, to

Colossians, and Paul's letter to the Colossians, chapter 1, verses 5 to 6 there, as he introduces what he has to say there. He says, this gospel, this word of truth, the gospel has come to you indeed, as indeed in the whole world. It is bearing fruit and growing, as it also does among you since the day you heard it, and understood the grace of God in truth. See, twice there, Paul is referring to the gospel, to the revelation God has given of himself to us through the gospel, as in truth.

You think about truth, you think firstly about God, God being truth, God being ultimate truth, reliable truth, undistorted, which is of course what truth really has to be, by definition.

And it's revealed through Jesus and John in his first, in his gospel, in the first chapter of his gospel, you remember very well that famous statement there, the word became flesh and dwelt among us, we beheld his glory, the glory of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth. What was seen in Jesus is God, full of grace and truth. But he talks also about walking in the truth, that's truth as where our life is grounded as Christians. We cannot think of being a Christian without having our lives anchored in the truth of God, and dominated by the truth of God. But he talks here about walking in the truth, verse 4, I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. What is it to walk in the truth? If the truth is God, and God having revealed himself as the God who is truth through the gospel, and if that gospel itself is indeed God's truth as it is, what is it to walk in the truth? Well, to walk in the truth, just in common with so many other passages in the Bible that speaks of a believing life as a walk, following a certain pathway, that's exactly what John has in mind there as well.

[8 : 58] It means to live in conformity to that truth, to seek always to conform to that truth. Now, that's not to be simply in a bare obedience to the truth, just as you would find the kind of suggestion that would say to us as Christians, you know, you're just really following a creed, even if you don't understand it, because you're saying it's the word of God, therefore you're forced into an acknowledgement that you have to follow it, that you have to apply it to your life. Of course, that's not the case, as we'll see in a minute. It's not a mere conformity to a commandment or to the truth, though that's part of it. It's a loving commandment. It's a loving conformity to the truth.

You don't follow Christ, you don't follow him, and don't follow his truth in a way that is against your will. You love to do it as a Christian. You want to do it more and more as a Christian.

You walk in the truth because you know that God's delight is in you doing that, and your delight is in doing that for God. And so he's saying here, to walk in the truth. Your children, some of your children, he doesn't say all of them, some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. In other words, where God has revealed his truth to us, where we have this gospel, where we have, whether it's in commands or in promises and propositions and warnings, there are all of these elements in God's truth in the gospel for us. And what John is saying is, walking in the truth means paying attention and giving such attention to those elements of the truth as you seek to conform to them, to have your life shaped by them, how you think, how you come to conclusions, the conclusions you come to, how you engage in conversation, the words you use, the language you use, the kind of lifestyle you follow in the face of the world and among other Christians.

All of that is part of walking the Christian walk. All of that is part of walking in the truth, conformity to the truth. We have no liberty whatsoever to change the truth. We'll see in a minute how that's especially appropriate when you see what John is saying about many deceivers having gone out into the world in verse 7 and 8. We have to watch ourselves. It's not, we're not at liberty just to change or to alter or to amend or to in any way distort this truth, even though we're not involved in a rigid legalism. Because we accept this as God's word. I know it has to be translated into languages that people can understand and follow. But that's not actually altering the truth itself. If we're faithful to the original languages of the Bible, Hebrew and Greek, in translating it, then we're still maintaining the truth of God as he revealed it to us. And as he continues to speak through that truth.

So it's not really, it's not as you'd find sadly all too commonly nowadays, people saying as Christians indeed, or at least to call themselves Christians and in many ways live a Christian life. But nevertheless say, well the Bible is really, it's really just out of date in certain things. And although Paul said such and such, he wouldn't have written that nowadays. He wouldn't have written about marriage the way he did.

[12 : 37] He wouldn't have written about the kind of things you find in human sexuality, for example. If he were living today, he wouldn't actually have written it in that way. He'd have taken account of the way people think and the way people are actually living their lives now. So as to just make it a bit different and to leave out these sort of references that are no offensive. No, he wouldn't. Because it's not Paul's truth. And it's not John's truth. It's God's truth. And if you believe in what the Bible is, as God's revelation of himself, then John and James and Peter, inspired as they are by God, are no more than agents of God.

They are writing what God directed them to write. And therefore it comes to us as God's truth. And we're not at liberty to say, well, you know, it needs to be adjusted or changed or amended here and there just to keep up with modern trends. How would it be the truth then? If truth is malleable and changeable, it's no longer truth. And that's our great privilege, to walk in the truth as God has defined that truth and that walk for us. To be true to God. That's why he says that he is rejoicing. So to follow Christ, to be a Christian, to be a disciple, is to walk in the truth. To be content and satisfied with the Bible you have. With the terms that God has laid out in it. With all the things that are there, whether restrictive or otherwise. The liberties as well as the restrictions. They are there for our conformity to in walking in the truth. And if that sounds harsh, then I don't want it to sound harsh.

I don't want it to sound negative. I don't want it to sound legalistic. It's simply what obedience to God requires. A loving obedience to him.

So it's God and our Savior. Now that's why he says here, I rejoiced greatly. And if you compare the next letter, which God willing will look at this evening, you'll find in the fourth verse of the next letter, 3rd John, something very similar. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth. My children, by that he means those who are under my care as an apostle, as a teacher of God. I have no greater joy than to know that my children walk in the truth. And what great joy that gives. Particularly all of us who seek to preach the gospel, to see those under our pastoral care walking in the truth. It gives us great joy. There is no greater joy than to find people coming to take up walking in the truth.

To take up this camino, if you like to use the words that we mentioned to the children. This pilgrimage, this walk in the truth. And of course the other side of it, the contrary, is equally the case. It saddens us so much. It causes us grief of heart to find people departing from the truth. Leaving the walk in the truth that they once walked in. For whatever reason.

[16 : 05] And sadly it happens. People turn away from the church. And sometimes it's really for no important reason. I've come across people who've said, I'm just tired of the church at the moment.

I'm not really in with the church at the moment, so I'm going to give it a break. What is that saying about a person? Well, it's saying they're going to church for the wrong reason, for a start. Can we ever say, when we're coming to worship God in church, will we ever say, I'm tired of Jesus for the moment, so I'm going to take a break? Of course not.

But that's what it amounts to. To depart from the truth, at least, is giving the impression, at least if nothing else, that we're tired of the Lord. I want to take a break from following Jesus, from walking in the truth. I have no greater joy than to know that my children walk in the truth.

The source of my personal delight, of course, apart from my own walk with God, is to see all you people walking in the truth. No greater delight than that. And no greater sadness than that any of you or anyone else should walk away from it, should stop walking in it and walk in another path.

However difficult the way may be, however challenging it may get, there are parts of that Camino de Campostello that I mentioned, the Campostello that I mentioned to the children, they're very difficult. Most of it's fairly plain, but there are difficult parts of it. That's the Christian life for you.

[17 : 47] Some of it's very easy to walk, very pleasant to walk. Some of it's very difficult terrain. But it's still the same route. It's not a different route, though it has different aspects to it.

So keep walking in the truth. Please don't be diverted from it. Because we'll see in a minute it's all too easy. Walking in the truth.

And secondly, walking in love. I need to hurry on because we've got two more points to cover. Walking in love. Well, love, of course, is a distinguishing mark of God's people, particularly in their life together.

If you turn to 1 John 3, and verse 14, you'll find what he's saying there. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers.

Whoever does not love abides in death. And you find the same verse 19. By this we shall know that we are of the truth and reassure our heart before him.

[18 : 45] So there it is in verse 14. We know that we have passed out of death into life because we love the brothers. We love our fellow Christians. Why is that a mark of having passed from death into life?

A mark of being saved? Well, for one thing, because in John's day, it was pretty dangerous to actually show your allegiance to the truth and your love for Christians together, especially if that was interpreted sometimes as it was as a crime against the state.

If you were living in North Korea today, it wouldn't be so easy to openly show your love for fellow Christians. You'd have to watch. You'd have to be very careful how you did that.

And it would be a mark of your having passed from death to life that you did so. An assurance to yourself that the truth is in you, that you are a disciple of Jesus, that you love the truth.

That's what he's saying to us here then. He's saying it's a distinguishing mark of walking in love as a distinguishing mark of God's people.

[19 : 51] This is love that we walk according to his commandments. And this is the commandment, just as you've heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it. Now, love is no mere sentiment.

Love is no mere sentiment. It's not just something that exists in your mind. Love is something that has a practicality to it. It's a distinguishing mark of the Christian because it's seen in its practical outcome.

Again, you go back to 1 John, and you see that he says there in one place, we should not love in word, but in deed and in truth, in action, looking after those who are in need or tending to those who are in need, looking after each other.

So it's a mark, especially in times of danger, of your concern to help other fellow Christians. But it's also a commanded walk. It's walking in love because God has commanded this.

Just as we were commanded by the Father, verse 4, and it's not a new commandment, he goes on to say, this is love, that we walk according to his commandments.

[20 : 58] This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning. There's a very, very interesting and important combination and overlap and intertwining, if you like, of truth as commandment and love in response to it.

And the two always have to be held like that in our thinking as Christians and in our walk together as those who love the truth of God. Love is not optional.

Love is not something that you decide to do yourself. It's actually from that perspective here of this passage commanded by God. And yet your love for God and your love for fellow Christians is not just out of a bare obedience to a command.

It's because love is more than obedience to a command, but it's not less than that. That's the combination that you have in that regard. In other words, that Christian fellowship, a Christian congregation, a congregation like ourselves, like our own, must have that combination in it at all times that wonderful balance between truth and love.

Because if you overbalance to either side, you're into extremism of some kind or other. Let me just give you how John Stott, one of the commentators that you find on the writings of John and John Stott's writings are very much worth reading except that near the end of his life he came to have a different view to a reformed view of hell.

[22 : 29] But apart from that, I know nothing about John Stott that I would not recommend. His work on the cross, his work on the Christian life is fantastic. It's beautiful. Lovely stuff to read. John Stott's books, if you can get them here.

They're still available, of course. But this is what he said here. The Christian fellowship should be marked equally by love and truth. And we are to avoid the dangerous tendency to extremism, pursuing either at the expense of the other.

Then he says this, Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth. And our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love.

Isn't that a wonderful presentation of the points that John is making? Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth. Isn't that what the world is saying?

Isn't that what you find so often? It's all about love. It's all about love. As if there was no framework at all to love, but love. Well, John is saying, you can't love without a framework of truth.

[23 : 37] You need to have love combined with truth. Our love grows soft, Stott says, if it is not strengthened by truth. And our truth grows hard if it is not softened by love.

And he finished by saying this, we need to love, sorry, we need to live according to scripture which commands us both to love each other in the truth and to hold the truth in love.

Love each other in the truth and to hold the truth in love. That's what we want to be as a congregation. not a loving congregation at the expense of walking in the truth.

Not a congregation that values the truth at the expense of not loving one another. But both. So that our love is strengthened by the truth of God and that our conveying of the truth is itself as it should be because it is shot through with love and love as exemplified in Jesus himself.

So walking in love is a distinguishing mark of a Christian and a Christian fellowship and it's combined with the commandment of God with the truth of God as a command to walk in love.

[24 : 55] But thirdly, he talks here about being watchful the need to be watchful in truth and love. In verse 8 watch yourselves so that you may not lose what we have worked for but may win a full reward.

And that of course is in light of what he said earlier there that many deceivers have gone out into the world. In verse 7 those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh such one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

Now you see that's a very specific reference to what this deception was about on the part of those who were peddling it around as the word is used in the Bible as an untruth as something very different to the gospel.

They do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. There are some things that don't make much difference really as to what you believe and whether you believe them or not.

But to believe that Jesus Christ did not really have a true humanity is taking away a foundational plank of the gospel. It's actually interfering with what is true of the person of Jesus himself as the saviour.

[26 : 12] And what he's saying here is that those who have gone out and are now disseminating this idea they are actually the deceiver and the antichrist. And in fact in 1st John you find John saying in chapter 2 of his first letter many antichrists have already gone out into the world.

There are many he says that have denied certain foundational fundamental truths of the gospel so they are the antichrist. You can't just limit the antichrist to any particular view that's contrary to the gospel.

Wherever you find especially and you notice that John is saying here they went out from us in his first letter they actually went out they've gone out from us they actually were within the church.

They were within the visible church to begin with they were companions of those that John is writing to here. But they went out from us. They didn't remain in the fellowship because they were actually wanting us to believe this untruth about Jesus.

And so they are heretics against which you need to watch yourselves. Paul when he was saying farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20 one of the things he counseled them about was how after he had gone ravenous wolves would spring up ravaging the flock entering into the flock of God deceivers the antichrist.

[27 : 46] You find somebody in the visible church today who will say that Jesus didn't actually physically rise from the dead that's the antichrist. that's a deceiver.

That's of the works of the devil. That may sound harsh that may sound cruel that may sound unloving but that's biblical. It's according to God's mind as it's expressed in his word.

This is the deceiver and the antichrist. Wherever you find something foundational to the truth to the gospel to the person of Christ to God being taken away being denied then that is the antichrist that is the deceiver.

That's why he's saying watch yourselves look after one another be on your guard be highly vigilant because there are many people going about John was saying in his day who have gone out from us and who are deceivers and who are trying to get others who are Christians to believe their false teaching.

False teaching was something that troubled the early church in the apostles day. You'll find it in Paul's writings in Peter's writings James John here as well. Now he's saying something relevant to ourselves watch yourselves be careful.

[29 : 03] See for me for you rather today in your assessment of what's said from this pulpit from my ministry as a preacher of the gospel that you're called to preach the gospel to you to be your pastor what's important to you is not just what I say from this pulpit what I include in my sermons what's important to you too is what I don't say what I consistently would leave out which I hope I'm not doing for any fundamental truth that the Bible tells us especially if I were to leave out consistently some aspect of Christ's person deliberately so to try and mislead you and deceive you then I would be the deceiver and I would be the antichrist that's why you have to watch yourselves watch what it is not only you believe watch what it is you're hearing watch what you're listening to take care of your soul take care of the fellowship take care of who you are as Christians and that's why

Paul had no hesitation when he was writing again to the Colossians in chapter 1 and verse 28 talking about Christ and you the hope of glory him we proclaim warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom that we may present everyone mature in Christ that's the objective of preaching the gospel to present all of you by God's grace by God's power by God's blessing perfect mature in Christ that's why there has to be in the preaching of the gospel warnings as well as more pleasant things because we're aware of deceivers and they need to watch ourselves and they need to assess what it is we're believing and we're living out in our lives so admonishment and remember you live in a world where admonishing and giving out that sort of counsel or warning is increasingly rejected people don't like nowadays to have their lives to have themselves warned or admonished they're in charge of their own life who are you to tell me what to do once that comes into the hearing of the gospel and into the preaching of the gospel as well indeed well you've got a serious problem because the bible doesn't just fill you with pleasant thoughts all the time it's also full of warnings about looking after yourself and the moment we start taking these out or leaving these aside we've got an imbalance compared to what

God has given us so we have to be watchful in truth and love when he's saying here watch yourselves he means be on high alert because in verse 9 this is what he says then let me just conclude with this everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God that's not just teaching about Christ but the teaching that Christ himself has given us or he himself approves of such as he gave to the disciples in that time but we take the whole bible because Christ is God is essentially something that he himself has given to us as a revelation of himself well he's saying here whoever everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God isn't that something that you really see so often nowadays when you find some theologians some liberal theologians some alternatives to what we find as reformed teaching saying well you're not progressive enough you guys who believe the bible literally and you're not progressive enough if you really believe that

Jesus actually died and that he died a sacrificial death and that he died a death that propitiated God in his wrath you're really so far behind the times you've not progressed you're not progressive enough in your theology you're not progressive enough in your thinking you're not progressive enough in your preaching in your Christian understanding well here is John saying ok if we progress onwards and leave aside such teachings as these the bible is giving us we've actually regressed we've gone ahead in our own thinking but we left God behind such a person he says is going ahead in that way does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God that's the crucial thing for me today as a Christian as a preacher of the gospel for you as a listener and a hearer of the gospel and as a Christian living in this world or somebody if you're here you're still not saved this is absolutely crucial to you as well the person you're going to put your trust in in order to be saved is

Jesus Christ and the Jesus Christ that you need in order to be saved is the Jesus Christ this bible tells you about without adding anything to it or taking anything from it the thing I need to know more than anything else today is do I have God or not whoever goes ahead in this way does not have God do you have God in your life today is he in your understanding of what it is to be a Christian is your understanding of the Christian life from being in Christ from Christ being in you from something that you know of is more than just a slavish attachment to a word or to a creed but a loving attachment to the truth and a trusting in the person of Jesus Christ you know what distinguishes the Christian religion if you can use the word religion or Christian faith from every other faith from every other religion in existence what distinguishes it above everything else is that it's about a relationship with a living person you don't find that anywhere else

[35 : 16] Islam Buddhism Judaism Jesus is not a living person today except in this gospel and it's with that living person of Jesus that we have our saving relationship today this is eternal life Jesus' own definition to know you the only true God and Jesus Christ whom you have sent that is what John is really saying is essential to know the truth in Jesus to love the truth in Jesus to love one another in truth and in love to be watchful against deception and therefore to live for God let's conclude by singing to God's praise in Psalm 119 119 and at verse 137 this is on page 165 tune as Duke

Street we're singing verses 137 to 144 page 165 oh Lord you are the righteous one the statutes that you give are just you lay down laws of righteousness entirely worthy of our trust so on verses 137 to 144 oh Lord you are the righteous one the statutes that you give are just you lay down laws of righteousness and darling worthy of our trust my seal consumes and wears me out because my foes forget your word your promises are tried and proved and

I use serve and love them Lord though I am lowly and despised your precepts I do not forget eternally is your righteousness who is the law that you have said distress and trouble press me down what your commands are mighty life grant wisdom so that I may live you start you start forever I if you allow me to get to the main door please after the benediction now may grace and mercy and peace from God the Father the Son and the Holy Spirit be your portion now and evermore

Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen I met Amen Amen Amen Amen
Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen afterward Amen Amen Amen Amen
Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen Amen