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The Joy of Authentic Christian Community

Cultivating Authentic Christian Community

1 John 1:1-4

Pastor Bryan Clark

Did you know, as a person made in the image of God, you were made for relationship? No matter how much money you make, no matter how much stuff you accumulate, no matter how much activity you busy your life with, your soul will never thrive unless you are engaged in deep, authentic, personal relationship. We as a culture are more connected; we're more crowded and we're more lonely than we've ever been.

Several years ago I picked up a book called *Bowling Alone*. I don't usually buy books just because of the title but I did that one. It was written by Robert Putnam who is a sociologist and I was very curious, "What does that mean?" He was talking about at one time, as a culture, when we would go bowling, we went bowling *together*. It was about leagues; it was about people; it was about social; it was about getting together; it was about hanging out; it was about eating; it was about drinking; it was about a whole evening together—and part of that included bowling. But you go to a bowling alley today and there's a couple of people down on the far lane and, what he says is, "Today we are bowling alone." And he uses that as a metaphor to say that we have dramatically changed as a culture. We've become more isolated; we've become much more a nation of individuals. Now there are lots of ways to kind of look at and assess a culture. Cultures are complicated—there is no one way to explain it. But one of the interesting ways to think about our culture and what has changed is through the world of communication. It's kind of a world I'm more familiar with and it makes sense to me. Do you realize in the history of the world, there have only been two major communication shifts—and we're actually in the middle of one today? There's been a shift from an oral culture to a literate culture and, today, we are shifting from a literate culture back to what some refer to as a secondary oral culture. Another way of saying that is communication-wise, in terms of how we think and process information, we have more in common with people a thousand years ago than people fifty years ago. It's really quite a radical shift.

Now this has dramatically affected us as a culture. Go back and think about an oral culture. An oral culture didn't write things down—it was passed on orally. That's the whole point. So time was spent face to face. The very essence of an oral culture requires a high level of community. It's the only way anything could be learned or passed down. So you think about an image: At the end of the day, a group of people sitting around a fire telling stories and talking about life—that was how life was lived. An oral culture required a high level of community. But about the first century with the Greeks, the advent of a more literate culture was introduced—much more of a writing culture, of a recording culture. Then in about the 1450's, with the invention of the printing press, of course that was intensified many times over, with what we would refer to as *print media*. So we've gone from an oral media to a print media. Now think about the difference. We've gone from a communication that brings us together to a communication that divides us apart. We don't read a book together. It's a very individual, isolated experience. Now that isn't to say any of this is right or wrong or good or bad but it is to remind us that the medium is never neutral. The medium always has a message and print media caused us to be much more a nation of individuals. One of the ways to think about the imagery is: imagine people gathered around the fire telling stories and compare that with someone sitting by a fireplace reading a book. It's the difference between those two cultures.

Well, as we continue to develop in terms of technology, we've actually become more individualistic and more isolated. Think about the advent of television. It used to be, in order to have activity, you leave the house and you go and you spend time with people. But with the advent of television, you come home; you push the garage door opener; you go in; you close it and you spend your evening isolated around an electronic box—more alone, more isolated than ever. You think about that technology as it relates to, then, the personal computer and don't miss the language. Now you have your own *personal* computer. Once you could hook it to the Internet, you don't ever have to leave your house again. Everything you could ever want is connected through your own personal communication. It goes from the personal computer to your own phone to Facebook. Have you ever stopped to think about the fact that Facebook has literally changed the definition of a friend? There's an entire generation now that will understand friendship totally differently than the generations before them. Again this isn't to say it's good or bad or right or wrong. It just "is"—and it has dramatically affected us.

Think of the world of games. There was a time when games brought us together—where that was something that we did together as a family. We did it together as people; it was something that was really about community. Today games are isolated on your computer or your phone. You can go down to the basement 'til 2 o'clock in the morning and play games all by yourself. Think about how different that is than previous cultures. If Robert Putnam was writing his book today, he would have to say we not only bowl alone, now we don't even have to go to the bowling alley. We virtual bowl in our basement with Wii bowling. But, as a culture, think about how that has changed us.

Now again, without trying to say this is good or bad or right or wrong, what we are saying is the medium has changed us. And without question we have become more isolated; we have become more individualistic; we've become more lonely. If our soul thrives on authentic relationship, what it tells us is, in order to have a thriving soul, I will have to choose to step out of the current of the culture and pursue something other than the direction the culture's going.

Ten years ago we studied through 1 John. The reason for that was to raise the value on Christian community—and to introduce the concept of life groups. If you were around ten years ago, you heard language like this: "We are not a church *with* small groups; we are a church *of* small groups." You heard language like this: "There are two primary environments—the worship service and a life group." Well, for ten years we have given it our best shot. In the last couple of years we have been in assessment mode and our conclusion is: it simply has not worked. There are some of you that have been in life groups and you have found it deeply meaningful. We would encourage you to continue that. But there are many more of you that would say it just hasn't worked. It feels like it's the requirement: "We feel like it's the rule; we feel like to be a good Berean, that's what we're supposed to do, but it is not something I look forward to. I haven't found good community there. It just hasn't worked for me." So ten years later, here we are again—back through 1 John—in order to raise the value of community. We again want to define why this matters. But rather than trying to use life groups as a means to facilitate that, what we'd like to suggest is that people pursue community in a way that's meaningful to you. I would suggest to you, community can happen with two guys fishing in a boat, with a group of guys wrenching on a car, with a group of people hanging out at a coffee shop, with a group of people serving together in a ministry. It depends upon you; it depends upon your personality; it depends on your season of life in terms of what works for you.

Over these last few years there have been several national research projects and the conclusion nationally is the same. Small groups simply weren't accomplishing what everybody thought they were. So, again, if your small group is deeply meaningful to you, by all means continue that and

we'll continue to resource that. But mostly we want to kind of blow it open, give you the freedom to pursue community in a way that's meaningful to you. What we do want to emphasize, though, is that your soul will never thrive without deep, authentic, meaningful relationships. And so going back through 1 John is to remind us what that means and what that looks like.

With that being said, I invite you to turn with us to 1 John, Chapter 1. If you are new with us, you may not know that any time we go through a book study like this, we provide study questions. You can go through them as a small group, with a friend at a coffee shop, or even use them yourself in your own quiet time. What we would encourage is, as we go through this together as a community of believers, to try to better understand community—that we would actually do it together, that you would pick up those study questions and kind of think about this whole thing with us over the next couple of months.

John is the author of this letter. He is the same John who wrote the Gospel of John. He is the apostle John and there are a lot of similarities between the Gospel of John and his letter here. Typically when we talk about a letter, there's a template. Like all of Paul's letters basically use a letter template where there's an introduction of the recipients and who he is and kind of, "Grace and peace to you," and then on into the letter. In this particular letter, what's distinct about it is, there is no template. From the very first sentence he's right at the topic—and it reminds us there's a real sense of urgency here. This is much more like a sermon than it is like a letter. John is writing to the churches in Asia Minor that, at one time, were flourishing but at the time of the writing of this letter, they are coming unraveled. And they're coming unraveled because of false teachers who have questioned both the person and the work of Jesus, and everything is starting to fall apart. So it's like John doesn't feel like he has time to say, "Hey, how's it going; grace and peace...." It's like right from the first sentence, "Here's the deal." So you kind of get that sense throughout the letter. It's also true that John doesn't write in kind of a logical, linear sequence like you would think of Romans or Philipians or Colossians. He kind of writes more in a cyclical fashion. You might say he kind of goes in circles but, with each circle, he goes a little bit deeper, looks at things from a little different angle and it kind of spirals like this all the way through. So if we're in this—like four or five weeks down the road—and you say, "Hey, didn't we talk about this before?" you know that's John; it's not me; and it's just kind of the way it's written and that's the way we'll understand it.

All right, Verse 1:

What was from the beginning... (*NASB, 1 John 1:1a)

Now if you are familiar with the Gospel of John, a very similar start. The Gospel of John, Chapter 1, Verse 1: **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.** It's a very similar introduction here. The idea is that John is going to be talking about the person and work of Jesus. And quickly he identifies that Jesus did not start at Christmas—that Jesus is the eternal God. He has been from the beginning and that will be an important part of this theology. It reminds us of His deity that added humanity. In theological terms we refer to this as the hypostatic union of Christ. Probably write that down; share it with a work associate tomorrow; they'll be very impressed; they'll know you went to church today. (laughter) But it actually is the fullness of the doctrine of the deity of Christ and the humanity of Christ.

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands...

John is identifying himself as an eye witness—as a credible witness to the person and work of Jesus—because that’s what’s being questioned. So he says...**what we have heard**. So John is saying, “This isn’t second-hand information. I heard this directly out of the mouth of Jesus.” Second of all **...what we have seen with our eyes...they’re eyewitnesses to the events that are recorded...what we have looked at...** Now we would say in English, “Isn’t *what I have seen* and *what I have looked at* the same thing? But these are two distinct Greek words. *What I have looked at* is a translation of the Greek word from which we get our English word *theatre*. It means to *look intently*; it means to *scrutinize*. You think about when you go to the theatre; you aren’t really going there to carry on a conversation. You’re going there with the intent to watch. And you’re not just going to watch; you’re going to be a bit of a critic and you are going to decide if you like it or you don’t like it. That’s kind of the roots of this word that John is saying: “We didn’t just see it; we scrutinized it. We studied it; we determined whether it’s true or not.” And then finally **...what we have touched with our hands**. That’s a Greek word used to describe a blind person touching and feeling something to figure out what it was.

Now that’s an interesting imagery that makes a lot of sense to me, because my dad was blind. So every Christmas part of the fun was my dad would open a present and then he would feel it and he would shake it and he would try and figure out what it is. So that imagery makes a lot of sense to me. But it’s a very *hands-on*—it’s a multisensory experience: *We heard* Jesus; we *saw* Jesus; we *scrutinized* Jesus; we *touched* Jesus. There is a reminder that the record of the Gospels and the record of the New Testament are about those people that were eye-witnesses—that saw, heard, touched and scrutinized the person and work of Jesus. It’s very easy for somebody two thousand years later, pushing an agenda, to say, “I don’t think it’s true.” But what would be the basis by which that claim could be made? The Gospels are outstanding records of history. No matter how you scrutinize them, they emerge as more credible and more reliable than any other historical document of ancient history. So what would be the basis by which we would say they are not true? You also have to wrestle with the fact that virtually all of the New Testament was written within the lifetime of the eye witnesses to the events that are recorded. If what’s recorded in the Gospels and in the Epistles was not true, the message of Christianity would have been quickly discredited and the movement would have faded into the sunset. But actually just the opposite happened. Christianity virtually exploded and the biggest explosion was in Jerusalem itself where the events took place. The only explanation for that is that the events recorded were so believable; the evidence was so overwhelming, even Pharisees and priests by the thousands turned to Christ.

So John is saying to these believers in Asia Minor—as these false teachers have come along to question the work of Jesus—John is saying, “Hey wait a minute. I heard it directly out of the mouth of Jesus. I saw it; I scrutinized it; I even touched Him and I’m telling you this is what’s true.” So he’s kind of establishing those credentials. It’s all true! End of Verse 1:

...concerning the Word of Life.

Now John is the only New Testament writer who refers to Jesus as **the Word**. The Greek word is *the Logos*. In his Gospel, **in the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God**. And then Verse 12...**the Word became flesh**. Now there’s a lot of theological discussion around: What does he mean by *the Logos*? As a matter of fact there are a lot of books written trying to figure this out. In my opinion we have made it way too complicated and probably pushed it way beyond what John intended. When he’s talking about **the Word**, he’s talking about that which has manifested or revealed the invisible God. It’s exactly what Paul says in Colossians, that Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God. He is God’s *living* Word to us.

Think of it this way: If you've come in this morning and I'm just sitting there, you can assess a few things about me—but it's very limited. But when I start talking, I can tell you about my hopes; I can tell you about my dreams; I can tell you my story; I can tell you my heartaches; I can tell you my joys. The more I talk, the more you understand me; the more I reveal *me*. And in an oral culture that would have been the idea of *the Logos*—the Word that Jesus was God's revelation to us, that we might know Him more fully. It's the Word of Life!

Now that's something to ponder. We all talk about life and the fact is, we are all alive this morning, perhaps some more than others, but we are all still alive. But there are different *degrees* of life—you might say different *qualities* of life. When you think about the age old question, "Where does life come from?" this is one of the questions that has been posed to the new atheists and, frankly, to the old atheists for hundreds of years. "Where does life come from?" It's nonsensical to think that something comes from nothing—that life just suddenly *poofs* into existence. There has to be some explanation for why there is *something* rather than *nothing* and, "What is the origin of life? What is the fountainhead? Where does it come from?" Oftentimes Christianity is portrayed as a bunch of non-thinking people who just believe stuff by faith and the rest of the world goes kind-of-by science and the facts. But we would totally disagree with that. We would say the Christian worldview is the lens through which everything else in the world makes sense. It's the most reasonable explanation for everything in the world. One of those would be, "Where does life come from?" It would have to come from someone who has always existed—in the beginning—someone who is eternal, who actually is the fountainhead, who is the very source of life. So when Jesus is introduced as the Word of Life, it's saying, "Jesus isn't just alive. Jesus is the essence of life. Jesus is the fountainhead of life. Jesus is the source of life." When you are talking about quality of life, the life that is found in Jesus is the ultimate that life has to offer. So it causes us to think about life in a little different way.

...concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested...

That Greek word translated *manifested* is a word that means *to make known something that previously existed*. So it's saying: Jesus and this life have always existed but, in a moment in time, it was manifested; it was made known. The life was manifested and we have seen and testified and proclaimed to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us. So what is the descriptive of this life, that is the essence of life, that is the fountainhead of life, that is life at its finest? And the answer is: eternal life.

This is one of those phrases that we throw around a lot in Christianity. I'm not sure we always understand what we're saying. What do we mean by *eternal* life? There is a *duration* of life and that's what most people think about. But there's also a *quality* of life that defines eternal life. It's the very life that defined God for all eternity. It's as pure and as right and as fulfilling as could possibly be. And that's eternal life—it's a quality *and* a duration of life.

Verse 3 then:

...what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also...

Now from verse 1 all the way through verse 4, it's one long, run-on sentence in the Greek language. And interestingly enough, you don't get the main verb until verse 3. If you have an NIV, they put it in verse 1 but in the Greek language it's verse 3—and I think John intended it that way. There's a building effect and then kind of this crescendo that he's an eye witness: he has heard; he has seen;

he has scrutinized; he has touched this One who is the very essence of life, who has always existed, who has now been made known to us, and the reason we proclaim Him to you is, verse 3:

...so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (Vs. 3b-4)

What John says is the reason we proclaim this to you is because of what has happened between us and God and it is so magnificent that we are inviting you to share the same. What they have experienced with God Himself is *Koinonia*—the Greek word translated *fellowship*. Now when we think of fellowship, we maybe think of cookies and punch in the fellowship hall or something like that. It's really not a term most of us use a lot. But the Greek word basically meant *to share in common with*. It was used to describe business partners; it was used to describe two people who owned the same piece of property. It was used to describe intimacy in a marriage. It was used to describe anything that people shared in common, but it's used in this context to say that the apostles were invited in to experience the life that exists between the Father and the Son.

Now the emphasis here is between the Father and the Son because Jesus is the one being questioned. But in all its fullness it would be the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. To understand the doctrine of the Trinity is necessary to understand God is a relational being. God didn't *become* relational—it's the very essence of who He is. God didn't *become* love—it's the very essence of who He is. God didn't, at some point, *give*—it's the very essence of who He is. It's the very defining mark and essence of God. Basically, when you read through the Bible from Genesis to Revelation, what you find is this consistent message that the Father glorifies the Son; the Son glorifies the Spirit; the Spirit glorifies the Son; the Spirit glorifies the Father. In other words there was this relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that defined the essence of life and it's always defined the essence of life. It has always been. To understand to *glorify the Son*, you might think in terms of celebrating. The Father celebrates the Son; the Son celebrates the Spirit; the Son celebrates the Father. The members of the Trinity celebrated one another. The very essence of that is: *to give oneself away*. In other words, the very essence of life as it's always been—in its richest, purest form—has been driven, not by the consumer asking, "What's in it for me?" but, by the very essence of life, is to give oneself away, to love another—to give oneself away to another, to celebrate another. And, as the Father, the Son and the Spirit have done that for all eternity, that is life at its very best. That is the very definition; that's the very essence of life!

Theologians down through the years have referred to this as the *Dance of God*. The Father dances with the Son, the Son with the Spirit, the Spirit with the Father. That is what has defined God for all eternity. At a point in time, Jesus was made flesh to make visible the invisible God and to reveal the very essence of life—the Word of Life. This is where life is found. This is the very essence of what makes life, life, and it's referred to as eternal life—a duration, but also a quality of life that is unlike any other.

What John is saying is that for all eternity this is the life that has defined God—that at a point in time, through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus, that God has actually invited the apostles to join in the dance. That's what he is saying. It's very John 17-ish—where Jesus said, "This is what we've always been about, between the Father and Son and now we are inviting the apostles—the followers of Jesus—to join in the dance. Through Jesus' finished work, to experience this life that is the essence of life itself. Most of what we experience in this world is a cheap substitute. This is the real deal! You can't get better than this. What John is saying is, as the apostles, they

were invited into it and now they proclaim the message as a way of saying, “We’re inviting you to join us in the dance!” That’s what he’s saying in Verse 3. “This is why we proclaim this to you, that you too might experience the life that your soul so longs for.”

This is why it is so important to understand the gospel is not merely a ticket to heaven. If you’ve understood the gospel to be a ticket to heaven, then how that translates out is then, “I have my ticket and that’s a really good thing and, because of that, I probably should do some good deeds. I should probably go to church; I probably should have some religious activity because that’s probably the right thing to do because God gave me a ticket.”

That would be the equivalent of thinking the purpose of having a baby is to merely go through delivery. So I have three girls. You say, “Do you have three girls?” “Yes, we’ve had three babies.” “What are they doing today?” “I don’t know; we left them at the hospital. (laughter) The whole purpose was to just have a baby and we didn’t even bother to bring them home.” I mean we would say, “That makes no sense!” The whole point of having a baby is to have a baby. It’s to bring the child home; it’s to love on the child. It’s to pour into the child, to give yourself away to the child, to experience this deep, honest love and connection with that child that’s unlike any other relationship. It is to experience the joy of all that. That’s the whole point! It’s about the relationship that flows out of having a child. What John is saying is that Jesus didn’t offer a ticket to heaven. He offered an invitation into a passionate love affair that has defined the very essence of God for all eternity.

Now this is a little hard to get your mind around. But for all eternity, that’s what God the Father, Son and Spirit have been doing and, at a point in time, they said, “Wouldn’t you would like to dance with us?” “Really, like one dance?” “No, forever; wouldn’t you like to join us forever?” The invitation to the apostles and the apostles proclaim to us today an invitation to join the dance. The result is verse 4—a life of **joy**. The end result of true community is our souls are filled with joy. We have found the life that our souls have been longing for and the result is joy; it’s the satisfaction, the sense that, “This is what I’ve always been thirsting for.”

Sometimes, when you listen to a message, there’s something that you need to go out and do. Sometimes it’s something you just need to know; sometimes it’s something you really need to think about. This is one you just really need to think about—and I want to raise two questions for you to think about. Number one: Would you honestly, in your heart of hearts, define your relationship with Jesus as a passionate love affair? This is what gets me out of bed in the morning; this is what puts a smile on my face; this is what puts joy in my heart; this is the very essence of my life. This defines life for me: I’m madly in love with this One who’s redeemed me and invited me into the dance.

It’s very easy over time to reduce the gospel down to a ticket to heaven. And that causes us to feel obligated to do a bunch of religious stuff and be a good boy or girl, because that is probably what God wants. But to be honest, there’s no real life-defining passion. If that’s true for you, my question would be, “Are you going to settle for that? Is that really all you want or is it possible that you would open up your heart to consider maybe there’s something more—something deeper, something richer, something far more satisfying?”

My second question would be: Honestly, in your heart of hearts, do you really have deep, authentic meaningful relationships with other people—relationships that breathe life into your soul? I’m not asking, “Do you know people?” I’m not asking, “Do you invite people into your living room once a

week?” I’m not asking if you have an accountability partner. I’m asking, “Do you really have deep, authentic meaningful relationships with people that breathe life into your soul?” If not, why not? And if not, are you willing to settle for that? Or are you willing to open your heart to the possibility there could be so much more.

Now it’s real important that we get this study off on the right foot. If what you’re hearing me say is that people need to be nicer to me; people need to love me more; people need to accept me into their group; people need to be better to me; I need to belong; you have totally misunderstood me. And if that’s how you are going to pursue community, I guarantee you, you will never find it. You will suck the life out of every relationship you are involved in. You cannot experience deep, authentic community as a consumer. The very essence of the life of God itself is to give yourself away—not to passively sit back and hope somebody loves on you, but to actively say, “I’m going to be that person flowing out of my passionate relationship with Jesus. I’m going to be that person that loves on other people. I’m going to be that person that seeks deeper, more authentic relationships with people. I’m going to be that person that breathes life into another person’s soul. I’m going to be that person that helps motivate people to love Jesus more.” My prayer is by the end of our 1John series, that we would be highly motivated to experience a more passionate relationship with Jesus and a more passionate relationship with one another.

Our Father, we are thankful that You offered to us the life that has defined You for eternity. Lord, help us to understand what you are really offering us and, Lord, help us to never settle for anything less. Lord, may we be people that genuinely love one another, that encourage one another, that breathe life into one another—that we would truly experience authentic Christian community. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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The Joy of Authentic Christian Community

Cultivating Authentic Christian Community

1 John 1:1-4

Pastor Bryan Clark

Opening Discussion

1. Do you sense people in our culture are becoming more or less isolated from one another? Why is that? What effect is it having on people?
2. In what ways has this trend affected you personally?
3. What does community (fellowship) look like for you? Where do you experience it? What are some identifying marks of true community for you? In what ways does community breathe life into your soul?
4. We will be learning about “authentic” Christian community in this study. Describe what you would consider to be “artificial” Christian community. Which do you believe is more common? Why? What does artificial community do to your soul? Why?

Bible Study

1. Read 1 John 1:1-4 in several different translations if you have them available. Also read the Gospel of John 1:1-14. What similarities do you notice from the same author?
2. John is obviously refuting the false teaching that is dividing the churches when he reaffirms what they witnessed as Apostles concerning Jesus. Think back to the Gospels and identify what they heard, saw, beheld and touched concerning Jesus (the Word of Life). See 1 Cor. 15:1-8 as well. How credible is John based on what he has heard, seen, looked at and touched? What’s the chance that agenda driven skeptics today have a better understanding of the person and work of Jesus than those who lived with Him in the first century?
3. What does John mean when he says the “Word of Life” was manifested? What life is this according to the text (1:2)? Compare John 17:3, 20, 21? What is the significance of this life to John’s opening statement, “What was from the beginning...?”
4. Why did John proclaim this message to the believers in Asia Minor (and us) according to 1:3? What is “fellowship” (community)? According to the text what is God “offering” us or better stated “inviting” us into? What is the potential of this “community” compared to what people

can experience without God? How would you describe attempts at community without God in the mix?

5. What should be the result according to 1:4? True community should breathe life (eternal life) into your soul. True community should be life giving not life draining. Can you describe experiences where you experienced true community and the result in your life?

Application

1. Based on our study so far write a definition of authentic Christian community. Include what it is and what should be the result.
2. In your opinion do most churches truly experience authentic community? If not, why not? Is it possible to have a “healthy soul” apart from true authentic community?
3. List some things you can do to begin to explore this topic of authentic Christian community.