

1 Truth

1 John 1:1–4

For all the ways Jesus could have described our relationship to him, he chose to call us his “disciples.” The Greek word we translate as “disciple” literally means “learner,” which means that at the most basic level, following Jesus means learning more about him all the days of our lives. Being a disciple of Jesus means we are called to learn about his nature, his identity, his character, his great work of salvation, and his instructions for us.

The word *disciple* is closely related to the word *discipline*—not the angry discipline of a cranky teacher, but the discipline that an inspiring teacher, coach, or mentor helps us to achieve to pursue a goal. Just as the discipline of music, writing, painting, or sculpting is something that a disciple would spend a lifetime perfecting, so following Jesus is a lifelong journey to grow in our understanding, love, and faith in Jesus.

This also means that there are not any quick and easy ways of learning as disciples. Do you ever read a passage from the Bible that you don’t understand? Do you ever deal with situations that you don’t think a righteous God ought to have allowed? Do you ever stay up late into the night, praying to God for answers that never seem to come? If so, then you have shared in the common, agonizing, truth-seeking experience of every other follower of Jesus throughout history. Part of

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learning to follow Jesus means learning to trust that he is gracious, loving, and wise even when he chooses not to reveal to us all that we desire to know.

But at the end of the day, Christian truth is characterized not by agony but by joy—or, better, Christian truth is characterized by joy in the midst of agony. Even when following Jesus becomes especially hard, Jesus calls his disciples to continue trusting in him, believing that he is the only place we can find real truth that will satisfy and delight us throughout eternity. As Jesus' disciples, we cannot hedge our bets by looking for truth anywhere else—not because we ourselves have all the answers, but because we believe that Jesus does. Whether he chooses to answer a given question is not the point. Instead, Christian discipleship means recognizing that whatever truth we learn, we will learn it from him.

THE TRUTH OF CHRISTIANITY

At its core, Christianity is about truth. Even more, Christianity has nothing at all to offer if the whole thing is based on a lie. Beginning our study of discipleship here is critical, especially in a postmodern world that has redefined truth to be whatever anyone wants it to be. In fact, the Apostle Paul went so far as to say, “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (1 Corinthians 15:19). If the hope we have beyond this life is a sham, then living for Jesus in this life is embarrassingly pathetic.

Some Christians have no problem believing that Christianity is truth. If they did not believe that Christianity was true, they could not be Christians. The issue is not complicated in their minds, and they would probably prefer to skip the subject of truth altogether and just move onto something else.

There are, however, three reasons why we still need to begin our study of discipleship with a study of truth. First, even those who believe in the truth of Christianity nevertheless still struggle to find truth in particular situations in their

lives. Only superficial truth comes easily, and superficial truth cannot satisfy us for very long. If we really want life-giving, joy-in-the-midst-of-sorrow truth, we all need to grow roots that sink deeply into the truth of Jesus.

Second, we need to know how to talk to the people who do not think that Christianity needs to be true to be good or helpful. Some believe that Christianity is mainly about ethics so that Jesus' goal was primarily to teach us how to live good lives. Others believe that Christianity is merely a source of beauty, where we gain personal enrichment and fulfillment. Although Christianity does establish a system of ethics, and although Christianity is a source of beauty, it is more than those things because Christianity is true. But if Christianity is not true, then it cannot be ethical, beautiful, or even good in any way at all. If Christianity is false, then we are fools to pursue it any further.

Third, we need to know how to talk to people who reject the truth of Christianity altogether. Many people do not see beauty in Jesus at all, and they see oppression and bigotry in Christianity rather than ethical righteousness and holiness. Nevertheless, Jesus gave an ongoing commission to his disciples, commanding us to make new disciples from all the nations (Matthew 28:18–20), and that Great Commission requires that we understand how to proclaim the truth of Jesus to those who do not yet believe.

And so, in the opening words of the First Letter of John, the author wastes no time to anchor all that he wants to say in truth—a truth he has personally experienced. He writes:

¹What was from *the* beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked upon and our hands have touched concerning the word of life—²and the life was manifested, and we have seen and we bear witness and we declare to you the eternal life, who was toward the Father and was manifested to us. (1 John 1:1–2)

John seems almost to struggle putting together words that can accurately capture the overwhelming truth of Christianity.

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These verses (along with verse 3) make up a lengthy run-on sentence in the original Greek as John tries to summarize this truth. He begins with three aspects of the truth.

TRUTH IS FROM THE BEGINNING

First, John tells us that the truth is “from the beginning,” which means that the truth is absolute, unchangeable, fixed, eternal, unshakable, and immovable. The truth is the same yesterday, today, and forever. No one can persuade, bully, coerce, push, or change the truth in even the smallest degree.

Christian discipleship means submitting to God’s eternal truth and acknowledging the limitations of our own knowledge. We are new, but God’s truth is from the beginning. We are brief, but God’s truth endures forever. We are small, but God’s truth is big. We are constantly changing, but God’s truth remains the same. The path of discipleship leads us to distrust ourselves while increasingly trusting in God’s truth.

THE LIFE WAS MANIFESTED

Second, John testifies that this truth was put on display among us in a very real, tangible, sensible way as a “life... manifested,” so that John and the other apostles listened to the truth speak, gazed upon the truth with their eyes, and even touched the truth with their hands. This truth is not a pie-in-the-sky abstraction invented by a manipulative con artist to gain power over the weak-minded. Some people will believe any strange idea that a cult leader teaches, but that is not what is happening here. John is not telling us about a floaty, other-worldly idea that came to him in some dream; he is giving us an eyewitness account of someone with whom he personally walked and talked.

John is describing a man—a flesh-and-blood human being, just like you and me. John says that he heard this man speak. He saw this man with his own eyes—in fact, he gazed upon this man long enough to know that this man was a human being, and not just someone who only seemed to be

human. And John is even telling us here that he touched this person with his own hands. This was no angel or ghost or mystical vision in the night—this was a man like us, who lived in our midst.

TRUTH IS A PERSON

Third, John finally identifies this truth. At this point, he knows we are still wondering, What is this truth of Christianity? In what exactly are we putting our confidence and trust? John makes it clear very quickly that when he talks about truth, he is not proclaiming the bizarre teachings of a cult nor a watered-down truth that simply encourages us to be good people. Instead, John points us to something extraordinary, yet practical: truth is not merely a doctrine but a person.

The most intriguing way that John describes this personal relationship between God and the truth is when he writes that this truth was *toward* the Father. Most Bible translations use the word *with* the Father, but the Greek word John selected is not one of the normal words for “with” (*sun* or *meta*) but the word *pros*, which is related to the word *prosopon*, the Greek word for “face.” The Greek word *pros* works almost exactly the way our English language would describe two objects as “facing” each other when they are positioned “toward” each other.

R. C. H. Lenski (1864–1936) explains the effect of using the word *toward* instead of *with* suggests “living relationship, intimate converse.”¹ The Father did not know the truth in a purely intellectual, dry way, but the Father actually had some kind of intimate, face-to-face relationship with the truth!

To understand what John is telling us about the personal nature of this truth, it is important to see the many similarities between 1 John 1:1–2 and the opening verses of the Apostle John’s Gospel. Compare:

1 John 1:1: What was from the beginning...

John 1:1: In the beginning was the Word...

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1 John 1:1: ...what we have seen with our eyes...

John 1:14: ...and we have seen his glory...

1 John 1:2: ...the life was manifested...

John 1:4: In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

1 John 1:2: who was toward [*pros*] the Father...

John 1:1, 2: ...and the Word was with [*pros*] God... He was in the beginning with God.²

1 John 1:2: ...and was manifested to us...

John 1:14: And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us...

Clearly, the “word of life” in the First Letter of John is the same “Word made flesh” from John’s Gospel: in both places, John is bearing witness to the person of the Lord Jesus Christ! This Jesus is the eternal Son who has been in face-to-face fellowship with the Father from the beginning but who now has been manifested among us as a human being.

This person is the greatest truth that John experienced in his entire life. As John and the other disciples lived in the presence of Jesus, traveling with him, eating and drinking with him, listening to him, and watching him interact with people and with God, they slowly came to understand the identity of their teacher: this man is also God!

The central message of Christianity is that God manifested his truth to us not through science, philosophy, or art (i.e., through human efforts to reach up to God’s truth) but rather by sending his Son down to us to become a fellow human being alongside of us. Whatever else Christianity is, John wants us to know first and foremost that Christianity is about God’s gracious choice to manifest in our midst the truth of the person Jesus Christ, the eternal God who became man.

THE FELLOWSHIP OF CHRISTIANITY

Because truth is a person, the truth of Jesus Christ is more than

just a set of facts. This truth carries important implications that should change the way we live our lives. Specifically, John tells us that the truth of Jesus Christ leads to fellowship in two directions—fellowship within the church and fellowship with the Father and the Son. Put another way, John is telling us that truth is personal.

John continues the run-on sentence that begins his first letter in verses 3 and 4:

³what we have seen and have heard, we bear witness also to you, that also you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship *is* with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. ⁴And these things we write, that our joy may be filled.

Fellowship means a relational commonality, or something actively shared between those in relationship with one another. John’s description of fellowship, then, is a bit surprising. He explains that his goal in writing is “that also you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” Why is John’s first goal “that also you may have fellowship *with us*”? Why not allow his readers immediate fellowship with the Father and the Son? Why must we have fellowship with John and the apostles first? There are two issues here.

On the one hand, John is not describing a purely institutional fellowship. In other words, he is not urging people toward bare church membership, as though we could be saved simply by making sure to jump through the hoops of joining a church or of making a point of attending the majority of that church’s worship services. Joining a church is important and should never be neglected by anyone serious about following Jesus, but it is Jesus alone who saves and not church membership. As George Smeaton (1814–89) writes, “It is the believer’s relation to Christ that puts him in connection with the Church; not his connection with the Church that puts him into a saving relation to Christ.”³ John is suggesting nothing to the contrary.

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To underscore the fact that Jesus alone saves, consider all the places in 1 John where the apostle speaks of salvation or condemnation (e.g., 1:9; 2:1–2, 22–23; 3:23–24; 4:2–3; 5:4–13, 20–21). In each of these texts, the issue at stake is always whether or not we believe in or reject Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God having-come-in-flesh, the one true God who is eternal life. John is not so much pointing to the people or to the institution as he is insisting upon fellowship (relational commonality) with the apostles regarding the truth of Jesus.

The fellowship “with us” that John writes about, then, is our common faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, the witness of the apostles concerning the Word of Life who was manifested in their midst. Of course, we must have fellowship with the apostles to join in their fellowship with the Father and the Son—we know nothing about the Father and the Son apart from what they have taught us.

On the other hand, there is a growing tendency among Christians (especially American evangelical Christians) to look upon the institution of the church with some disdain, preferring to take a me-and-Jesus-only approach. The radical individualism of American culture has raised a crop of Christians who embrace Jesus (at least, their own version of Jesus) but who reject the church filled with the other sinners whom Jesus came to save.

Of course, this is understandable to a certain degree. Jesus is perfect; his church is not. Jesus gave his very life that we might live; people in the church can sometimes defend all manner of selfishness and egotism in the name of God. But Christ has not given us the option of embracing himself while rejecting his church. One early Christian theologian named Cyprian of Carthage (200–258) put it bluntly: “You cannot have God for your Father if you have not the church for your Mother.”⁴

Again, it isn’t that bare membership in a church can save you; only Jesus can save. Still, when Christ saves us, he doesn’t bring us to himself as loosely connected individuals, where

each person is connected to Jesus on an individual, one-to-one basis. Instead, he saves us to integrate us all together into his church. We do not have the choice between Christ and the church. Christ died to save his church, and if we are indeed servants of Jesus, then we will love Jesus' church. If you wish to have fellowship with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ, you must have fellowship with the church that the Father sent his Son to die for.

But the good news is that God loves his church, and he works uniquely in and through his church to bring truth to his church, first to lead us to salvation and then to teach us for the rest of our lives what it means to follow Jesus day after day. In the church, God sends his Holy Spirit to bring life to dead men, women, and children. In the church, God pours out his Holy Spirit to open up to us the meaning of the Scriptures to convict us of our sin and to grant us the repentance and faith necessary for salvation. In the church, God's Holy Spirit teaches us everything about the glory of the crucified and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, who is himself true God and eternal life—and whoever confesses the Son has the Father also (1 John 2:23).

God doesn't give us the fullness of his truth in a vacuum, where we are isolated and on our own. God's truth is a person, and he only gives us the fullness of his truth through our personal relationships with the others in the church whom he is saving. In this fellowship of the church, by the Holy Spirit, the Father grants us full access to himself through the truth of his Son Jesus Christ.

So, we begin our study of discipleship here, with the truth who is a person, Jesus Christ. John is urging us to make his joy complete by embracing the eyewitness testimony of the apostles concerning the truth—that is, concerning the Word of Life manifested—so that we can have fellowship together; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When we think and talk about truth, are we thinking and talking about a person? What would change in our thinking, speaking, and living if we were?
2. The Apostle John balances the necessity of every individual's faith with the necessity of fellowship with the larger church. Do you emphasize one side over the other? What would need to change practically in your life if you struck a more biblical balance?

Notes

INTRODUCTION

1. Gregory the Great, *Moralia, or Commentary on the Book of the Blessed Job*, trans. James. J. O'Donnell, §4. <http://faculty.georgetown.edu/jod/texts/moralial.html>

CHAPTER 1: TRUTH (1 JOHN 1:1-4)

1. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1966), 376.
2. Again, most translations use the word *with* in John 1:1, but the Greek word is actually *pros*, just like in 1 John 1:2.
3. George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 267.
4. Cyprian of Carthage, *The Lapsed; The Unity of the Catholic Church*, trans. Maurice Bévenot, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, no. 25 (New York: Newman Press, 1956), 48–49.

CHAPTER 2: GOSPEL (1 JOHN 1:5-2:6)

1. A libertine is the name given to Christians who sin freely because they over-emphasize Christian liberty. People who make this mistake are also called antinomians, from the two Greek words *anti* (in place of) and *nomos* (law).