

## **CHRISTIANITY 101 – Going Back To Move Forward**

**Sunday, August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2023 - 10:00 a.m.**

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### **WHAT DOES BELONGING REALLY MEAN?**

#### **1 John 1:1 – 2:2**

For the next three weeks, we are going to look at what it means to be the church. And the reason I am doing this series is that after talking with a number of pastors across various denominations, there's a feeling that the church as a whole desperately needs recalibrating right now. Post-pandemic, we need to be re-centered and reoriented around the gospel and what it means to be a resilient, life-giving church for York Region in a post-truth, post-Christian world. What might surprise you as we go through these 3 different topics is that they are seemingly mundane and ordinary things. In fact, your instincts will tell you to switch off for these 3 messages. But there are a number of reasons for this.

We have a propensity for either, one – sensationalism, that is we come to church and we need hype, we need excitement, we need something crazy to happen to get our emotions going. Or secondly, mysticism. There's this idea that something incredibly weird and supernatural has to happen or God didn't show up, the Holy Spirit wasn't here in our midst. Thirdly, idealism. The church has got to be perfect, it's got to meet all of my expectations, it's got to be everything that I think it should be. Fourthly and finally, individualism. "I have been burned by the church a few times and you know what? I'm just gonna stick to me and Jesus. We've got this things going on but I've got more of a private faith."

There's issues with all of these. Firstly, sensationalism. If our aim is to give you excitement and hype, the best thing that we can do for you is give you Jesus. He is the most beautiful and remarkable being in all of the universe so if we don't give you Jesus, we have actually robbed you. If we give you anything else in his place, sorry, you're missing out.

Secondly, mysticism that there's got to be this weird supernatural experience that goes on. But if we look at the pages of scripture, we see that God does the supernatural through the most ordinary means. Sometimes we can't even detect it but God is working amongst his people supernaturally.

Thirdly, idealism. This idea that the church has to be perfect. Well, guess what, if the church perfect, you come in and you screw it up right away. So why would we say that the church has to be perfect when if it were to be, we wouldn't fit in anyway, we wouldn't find any sense of belonging in that.

Fourthly, individualism, that I could just sit at home and it's just about me and Jesus, my relationship with him, I don't need the church. The problem is that Jesus gave his blood for the church, the church is the blood-bought community of faith brought into covenant with him. So you're not just saved to yourself, you're saved to the church, the bride of Christ and he is coming back for her.

We need to be reminded over and over again exactly what a New Testament church is, what it looks like and why it is so important for you and I to commit to it fully. Nothing could be more important than this; the church is the God-ordained ecosphere where the grace of the Gospel comes to us in supernatural ways through ordinary life lived together through ordinary means. Ordinary people living ordinary lives with Gospel intentionality. That's what these next three weeks is all about.

So this week, we are talking about Belonging. What does it mean to belong to the church, and listen, there were so many ways that I could handle this topic, so many scriptures that I go to but this

morning, I want to take a different spin on it and I want to say this. If Cedarview Community Church is going to be a resilient, thriving, Gospel-centered, disciple-making church for the next 50 years if the Lord tarries, it will need to be steeped in Gospel culture.

What do I mean by that? Gospel doctrine creates Gospel culture. Gospel doctrine, right belief about God and what he has done for us in the Gospel creates a Gospel culture. The doctrines of God's grace upon us should create a culture of grace among us.

Francis Schaeffer, when talking about the church, said there were two orthodoxies in the church. There was orthodoxy of doctrine and orthodoxy of community. However it is possible for a church to have orthodox doctrine, to have the most theologically robust statement of faith on the subpage of their website and at the same time be a graceless reality. In other words, a church can unsay by its culture what it says about its doctrine.

And you know how I know this to be true? Look at this photo (KKK image), and I am sorry if it offends some. Is the doctrine true? Does Jesus save? Yes. Is the culture wrong? Absolutely! The culture is revolting, disgusting and anti-Christ. See how a church can unsay by its culture what it says about its doctrine.

Dr. Ray Ortlund has done a lot of work on this idea of Gospel culture and he puts this concept for us mathematically and I think it's helpful. He says this: "Gospel doctrine minus Gospel culture is hypocrisy. Gospel culture minus Gospel doctrine is fragility. But Gospel doctrine plus Gospel culture equals power.

We want to care deeply about what the Bible says and we want to get it right. But biblical truth was never meant to float in midair as mere abstraction. It was meant to be embodied, it was meant to be fleshed out together as the family of God. Because think about this with me, the gospel does not just say something, the gospel does something. The gospel is both a proclamation of the truth of Christ crucified, dead, risen and coming again; and it produces a people, the covenant community of faith who live in loyalty to him.

God's vertical grace comes to us in Jesus and then that grace is authenticated horizontally in the way we show love and grace to one another. We cannot just settle for orthodox theology, we also need relational beauty. We need gospel culture.

Now before we dive into our text this morning, let me set the context for 1 John. John the Apostle is writing this letter most likely to a group of churches in the first century and these churches were having some serious trouble. They had been messed with by some gnostical false teachers who had preached heresy and then run off and split the church and those who were left behind were shaken up. They were questioning themselves, they were saying "Am I really a Christian? Are we really Christians? Are we getting this right? Is this what it means to look like a real Christian? Should we have gone with them?"

So John is writing this letter to answer all of those questions and throughout this letter, John is saying "This is what a real Christian looks like AND this is who you are. Don't be fooled; don't be deceived, this is what a Christian looks like and this is who you are."

Here's the problem with John as we're going to see in today's text. John is not a straight line preacher. John is not like Paul or Peter, who work orderly and logically, where each line builds upon the previous one. No, John kind of jumps around and he meanders and then he circles back a bit. We're going to see that in this morning's text so bear with me as we kind of jump around this morning.

**1 John 1:1–2:2 - “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—[2] 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— [3] 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 is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. [4] And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. [5] This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. [6] If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. [7] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. [8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [10] If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us. [2:1] My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. [2] He is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world.”**

I am deeply convinced that the deepest desire of the human heart, no matter how we express it, is that of belonging. To be fully known and yet to be fully loved anyway. And it's the fear that that kind of belonging can't be real that causes us to put up walls in our lives, to manage this image, this façade of ourselves. And these walls act as a deflector for any offers of help or an invitation of any sort. These walls are on our front lawns and encompass what's really going on in our lives.

Often times, it's no different in the church. We have our programmed responses for every person we run into in the lobby after service. “We're good. Everything's fine.” Maybe we'll add a couple of high points from the week just to keep up appearances. Or there's those who instead deflect by just talking about their kids and their success, their accomplishments. But notice that it's only the stuff that makes it look like they've hit a home run at parenting. “We're all good.” Except we're not.

If we're truly honest with ourselves, most of the time, something's not okay. But we try to protect ourselves, don't we? Our default is to hide. To use the language of the biblical authors, we cover ourselves. And I'm convinced that this is the natural impulse built into our very DNA since the fall. In the garden when Adam and Eve first brought sin into the world and realized they were naked and immediately they felt shame, what did they do? They covered themselves. They sewed fig leaves together to try and cover their shame and then went and hid in the bushes. And you and I have been trying to hide ever since.

Mankind has been trying to cover its sin and its shame ever since but there's a problem with this, because just as the Lord came looking for Adam and Eve, when we encounter the living God, there is no hope in hiding. Which brings us to our first point this morning.

## **1) A GOSPEL CULTURE BEGINS WITH A RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF GOD**

Notice John doesn't start with them, John starts with God. This is gospel centrality and this is how we as Christians come to the bible. We first ask the question – “Who is God? What is God like? What has God done?” When we are moved to awe and wonder, we then ask the question “Who am I? How am I to live and to respond in light of this?”

John begins by saying in verse 5 **“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5).** Obviously this is not an exhaustive understanding of the doctrine of God but John begins his letter with this thought: God is light. Now textually speaking, this is what we call a parallelism. We see this a lot in Hebrew poetry, in many of the psalms. It’s basically just a way of repeating something in a different way.

First the positive is given, **“God is light”**, and then secondly, the same thought is given in the negative, **“And in him is no darkness at all.”** The point of this is emphasis. John is trying to say God is pure light. Think with me this morning about what light does. Light is healing, light is life-giving, light is warmth. This is who God is.

It’s hard for us to imagine right now because we’ve been having such great weather but think with me for a moment and come with me to the middle of February. It’s -15 degrees outside, it feels like it’s getting dark mid-afternoon and every little bit of vitamin D has been stripped from your body. What are you checking the weather app on your phone for every single day? Sun! Light! Warmth!

This is what God is for us, he is light and cleansing and healing and we come alive in his glorious gospel. He cascades upon our souls with the warmth of infinite suns. This is who God is, he is pure light, there is not a single speck of darkness in him, there is no bad side to God. There is no Jekyll and Hyde with God, you don’t have to worry about God being shifty with you. God is not moody. You are always going to get all that he is. Righteousness, justice, total purity, love, infinite goodness and exclusive holiness. This is who God is.

Now with all of that in mind, think what else with me what light is. It is illuminating, light is exposing. What happens to darkness when you turn the light on in the room? It disappears, it’s vanquished in a second and John is saying that there is not a single trace of darkness in God. What John is trying to help us see is that in the light of God, God reveals everything.

I think of the Samaritan woman in John 4 who Jesus meets at the local well. We know that Jesus went out of his way to meet this woman, he was waiting at the well for her. And this woman, she just wants to be alone, for goodness sake, she’s trying to avoid conversation. But you know what? Jesus just keeps pressing in. Jesus knows all of the things that she doesn’t want to talk about and the whole reason that she’s drawing water in the middle of the day is because she doesn’t want to be around people who are whispering behind her back, talking about her past and heaping more and more shame upon her.

Here she is talking to Jesus and she’s just trying to change the conversation but Jesus just goes deeper and deeper and deeper trying to find why exactly she’s hiding. But it’s only when Jesus actually gets to the heart of her situation that she actually experiences what it means to be fully known and fully loved by God.

Yet we do this all the time with God and we do this with ourselves, we all deflect. And doing it with God makes no sense at all, it’s ludicrous but that won’t stop us from trying. We might not verbalize it but deep down there’s this idea that if I just study enough theology, if I just do enough bible studies, we can keep Jesus out of the areas of our heart that he really wants to get to. We stiff-arm Jesus with our religiosity.

Unfortunately what we see in John chapter 4 is that Jesus is not a great respecter of personal space. Think about the rich young ruler in the Gospel accounts. This man was wanting Jesus to

accept only the things that he was willing to give up. But Jesus knew his heart and he asked for those things, the things that he wasn't willing to give up.

It's the areas of our lives that we most desperately try to protect that Jesus is most interested in dealing with. Hiding makes no sense. Psalm 139 (vs.7-9) says "Where can I go to escape you? If I go to the sky, you're there, if I dig a hole in the earth, you're there, you know every secret thing." Mark 4 (vs. 22) says that everything that is concealed will one day at the right time be revealed.

A gospel culture begins with a right understanding of God, namely that we cannot hide from him so why even try? We cannot hide from God. Secondly,

## 2) A GOSPEL CULTURE REQUIRES A SPIRIT OF PERSONAL REPENTANCE

Now come back with me to the context of First John, we've said that these false teachers have come into town and they've confused everyone with heresy and then they just left. I mentioned the heresy of Docetism but they were also teaching of protognosticism. In the same way that they disconnected Jesus from his physical human body, they taught that Christian's righteousness is disconnected from real life. This disconnection had led them to say that Christians don't actually sin, how could they, they're born of God. The physical world doesn't actually exist in some meaningful way so who cares? Live how you want. There's no need for repentance of sin or right living, what for? Your spiritual being is separated from your physical doing.

They said that you can be righteous and yet not practice righteousness. But then John says in chapter 3 of this epistle that the only people who are righteous are those who practice righteousness. Not because your good works save you but because they are the confirmation and the evidence that you have been saved. That you now desire to practice godliness.

While Christians do sin, they are stumbling sinners, not practicing sinners that are given over to licentiousness. Now look at verse 6, John says "**If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.**" Jump down to verse 8 "**If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.**" Now to verse 10 "**If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.**" (1 John 1:6, 8 & 10)

John is saying the same thing in three different ways, just in case we didn't get it the first time, and he is saying to us this morning, would you just drop the pretense? Enough with your own grandiosity, just get real for a second. Right and understanding about who God is, that he is light and in him there is no darkness at all creates an honesty with ourselves. We don't look at the room and look out at everyone else's problems. No, we get honest with God about ourselves.

But in the moment when we say that we want the light but then we continue to put up appearances, to put up this fake look, to put on a smile like the show must go on, what we actually believe is that God won't or isn't actually able to help us. We've got to hold it together, we've got to save ourselves, we've got to save face. John is essentially saying with terms of contrast, he's using stark contrast by using light and darkness, truth and lies, to say that is not Christianity. That is a false religion. John is saying that is believing a lie.

This message that God is light and there is no hiding from him means that calling sin what it is, is not legalistic or petty, it's how we get free. It's the only way we actually walk in the light. How ludicrous is it for us to think that we can polish ourselves up before coming to God, who is light?

Isn't that the whole point? God doesn't need to brace himself when I come near him because he's light, he's exposing, he's illuminating.

I can welcome God into every crevice of my heart with zero caution. God is not hiding from us saying "Find me if you can." God has made himself obvious, he has brought himself out into the open in Jesus Christ. He can be found in the light and when we are finally sick of being stuck in our sin, we can get honest with ourselves and actually get free.

The gospel frees me to be honest about the ways that I have fallen short instead of being crushed by those things. The gospel means that I don't have to hide because the good news of what a holy and all-knowing Saviour did for me on the cross is that he did it for me in spite of me. The gospel means that I don't have to impress because Christ has eternally secured me and he will never let me go.

So for you this morning, is there a spirit of personal repentance in you? Do you hate your sin? Do you find yourself turning to Jesus again and again in confession and repentance? Martin Luther said "The entirety of the Christian life is one of confession and repentance." Do you desire change? Because the fact is that if you are fighting sin, that is the evidence that you actually have spiritual life. Dead things don't fight, living things do.

A gospel culture requires a spirit of personal repentance. Thirdly,

### 3) A GOSPEL CULTURE RESULTS IN A REALNESS WITH EACH OTHER

**1 John 1:7 – "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin."**

This is kind of a plot twist right here. There's this interesting connection that John makes here and he does it later in his letter as well in chapter 4 when he's talking about the love of God. In chapter 4 starting at verse 7, John says "**Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. [8] Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.**" (1 John 4:7-8)

Now notice what John is saying here. John is not simply saying that God is love and therefore you can be loved by God and love God, although those things are true, but John is actually saying a lot more than that. He's saying God is love therefore you should love one another. If you don't love others, you don't love God, that is essentially what John is saying and the same goes with our text here in 1 John chapter 1. He states it in the negative. He says in verse 6 that if we say we have fellowship with God and yet we walk in darkness, we are lying and not practicing the truth. In other words, if you're walking in darkness, you are not experiencing fellowship with God.

But it's not just fellowship with God in the light of God that we experience, it's fellowship with one another. Look again at verse 7 "**But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.**" (1 John 1:7) Notice, John does not say we have fellowship with God, although we do, he says that in verse 6, he doesn't say we have fellowship with God, he says we have fellowship with one another.

I am struck by the way John sequences these things. If I had written this verse, I would have said this. "If we walk in the light as he is in the light, the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin

and then we have fellowship with one another.” Why would John put it this way? I think it’s because if Christian brothers and sisters aren’t honest and transparent and confessional with one another, we don’t actually have fellowship with one another. At least with our true selves as we are.

We hide certain things from each other out of self-protection, out of fear, out of shame. We think that people will think less of us and consequently we end up not knowing each other at all. We only know the best versions of ourselves that we come to church with every Sunday. And here, John is shining the light of Christ onto our religious games and he’s saying “Listen, this is not the way, this is not true Christian fellowship.”

John’s not saying “Okay, you’ve got to clean yourself up first before you can enter into fellowship.” No, the bible says that it’s actually in the fellowship that we find the healing, that we find the cleansing. Does John say that there’s not going to be any risk involved in that? No, it’s going to cost us something, right? If you’ve had that awkward conversation with someone in church, it costs us something. It costs us sometimes momentary embarrassment. It may hurt the image that we’ve worked so hard to build up in the eyes of others, but that is not our true selves anyway. The light of God is going to expose it eventually anyway, so why even try?

Remember at the start, I said that we as church-goers have bought the idea of idealism, that the church is supposed to be this pretty pristine thing. That if we were to confess our sin, it would just mess everything up. But what I read on the pages of the New Testament is not the church operating in a vacuum. A lot of the time, I see a messy church, but guess what? It’s God’s mess and he wants to deal with it. Guess what? God likes it that way, because why else would we need a Saviour?

Grace has been designed by God for the very people who can’t get their act together. John is connecting confession and honesty in community to real healing. When we bring things into the light of one another, we find healing and cleansing there because Christ’s very presence is among us.

Cedarview is meant to be so much more than a human support group. This is so much more than your crossfit or gym family, your book club family or your AA meeting. John is saying that in the light of fellowship among God’s people, there’s actually divine power. There’s the presence of Christ among us and you will not find that anywhere else in all the world. You only find that in the church of Jesus Christ.

I understand that generally speaking, church can sometimes feel like a difficult place to open up about our sin, right? It can sometimes be a difficult place to be a struggling sinner, I get that, but hear me this morning church, this ought to be the safest place for a sinner. And notice that I did not say this, I did not say this should be the safest place for sin. No, to be a sinner, to actually be honest with ourselves about our sin, to make it our aim to make this place the most unsafe place for sin but the most safe place for sinners.

So it starts with the right understanding of God, it starts with understanding that he is light and in him there is not a speck of darkness at all. That God is the one that we are moving towards. Yes we are stumbling, we stumble in sin daily but we are stumbling towards a glorious future in Jesus Christ. When we actually get real with ourselves, when we drop the pretense, when we walk in the light of fellowship, that’s how we get free. That’s how we come alive in the light of God.

So let’s wrap up. How exactly do we see this play out in Cedarview Community Church? How do

we put this into practice? How do we actually put feet on our faith? Again, Dr. Ray Ortlund, who has done a lot of work on the concept of Gospel Culture, he gives us this simple formula and it's really simple but I think it's really helpful. He says this; "Gospel culture, real Gospel culture, here on the ground, here in our midst is Gospel plus safety plus time." The Gospel plus safety plus time.

The Gospel, we need lots of it right? The good news for bad people that the finished work of Jesus Christ has paid for every one of our infinite number of sins. We need lots of Gospel. We need multiple exposures, we need as many exposures as possible. We need to constantly immerse ourselves in the Gospel. We need doctrinal orthodoxy and we need relational beauty in the Gospel.

A people marked by Gospel culture must realize that the Gospel is good news for a variety of people who are in different places and at different stages. The facets of God's goodness displayed in the Gospel shine into our spiritual darkness but it does so in a number of ways. There's not one way that God does this, but God is drawing people to himself, he's creating for himself a people through the Gospel. We need the Gospel.

Secondly, we need Safety. We need an environment that is gentle and not accusing. We don't need to embarrass anyone, we don't need to corner anyone, we don't need to shame anyone. But with respect and sympathy and listening and understanding, we allow people to just sit and exhale and to actually open up about what's really going on in their lives.

We need Gospel, we need safety and we need time. No pressure on people, no deadlines on how fast they should be growing. Things do not change overnight, we don't just instantly change. God is so patient and kind with us and we need to be patient and kind with others. We need this to be a gentle environment where there is Gospel and safety and time and it's when we finally get that, that's when people will finally start to get free.

Will we be a church that is marked by Gospel doctrine and Gospel culture? Biblical Christianity obliterates the assumption that I can get by, by merely tolerating my sin by concealing it. Because Christ has seen every one of my sins, Christ has seen every sin, past, present and future, I don't need to hide anymore. And Christ has died for every one of those sins anyway.

Remember, Jesus did not die to create a new community, Jesus died to create a new kind of community. This is the supernatural, blood bought bride of Christ. And so we the church are to welcome the real you with no pretense into the light of fellowship, into the covenant community of faith where we actually belong and where we actually start to get our lives back because people see the real us and not some fake veneer. And we walk in the light of God and we have fellowship with one another.

Let's pray.