

In Defense of Christianity

Without A Doubt, Part 1

1 John 5:1-3

Several years after the death of the Apostle John, right around 125 AD, Aristides attempted to explain Christianity to Hadrian the Roman Emperor when he visited Athens. His remarks were scripted, and that letter became known as A Defense of Christianity.

It read, and I quote, Christians persuade others to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction, brothers. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with necessary food. They observe the commandment of their Messiah and they live honestly and soberly . . . they praise God for their food and their drink, they render Him thanks. Such is the law of the Christians and such is their manner of life.ⁱ

As we return to this letter called First John, in the last two paragraphs of chapter four, the Apostle John has used the word “love” twenty-seven times.

It’s little wonder that his earlier nickname, “A Son of Thunder” would eventually give way to “The Apostle of Love”.

He loved the Lord and he loved the church and he loved his children in the faith and wanted the church to love one another.

But he could also be called, “The Apostle of Certainty”. In fact, in his closing remarks in *chapter 5*, he will use the verbs, “*to know*” seven times.

The phrases “*we know . . . that you may know . . . that we may know*” appear over and over.

The Greek language is much more precise than the English language; there are a couple of different verbs translated “to know” in your English Bible— but they carry different nuances of meaning, generally speaking.

Sometimes John will use the verb *ginoskw* (γινωσκω) – which is, to know by means of discovery, or experience.

In other words, you know the oven is hot because you just touched it and discovered that painful truth.

Sometimes John uses the verb form – *oida* (οιδα) – to know because it has been revealed to you.

Your mother told you not to touch the oven because it was hot. You could have gained that knowledge by means of revelation imparted to you; but you decided to touch it, and thus you learned, not by revelation, but by experience.

John will switch from one verb to the other, depending on the context.

Now, whether you’re a Greek student or not, one thing’s for sure here in First John chapter 5; the Apostle John wants to remove all doubts from the hearts and minds of these early believers – and ours.

There are truths he wants us to know – to be certain – to be sure of . . . some truths learned by experience – and some truths learned because God simply says so.

If you wanted a headline for chapter 5, the words, “Without A Doubt” would be perfect.

And the first truth that John wants to lock down is what it means to be a Christian – who we actually are.

Having traveled so much lately, I couldn’t help but laugh at this incident I read about where a heavily booked flight out of Denver was canceled and one weary agent was rebooking a long line of inconvenienced travelers. Suddenly an angry, irate passenger pushed his way to the front of the line, slapped his ticket down on the counter and said, “I have to be on this flight and it has to be first class!”

“I’m sorry sir,” the agent replied, “I’ll be happy to help you, but I have to take care of these people first.” The passenger demanded – in a voice loud enough for everyone to hear – “Do you have any idea who I am?” Without hesitating, the agent smiled, picked up her microphone and said, “May I have your attention please, we have a passenger here who does not know who he is. He’s asked me if I have any idea, and I don’t – so if you happen to know, please step forward.” The man walked away and the people in the terminal burst into applause.ⁱⁱ

Truth be told, we all ask the same questions – but the frustration of our world ultimately comes from lacking the answers – who are we? – and to whom do we belong?

John the Apostle doesn’t want any doubt or apprehension over who we are and to whom we belong – so he launches into what we’ll call, Our Family Kinship.

1. Our Family Kinship

Notice the first part of verse 1. Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God

If you understand the tenses of these verbs, John is saying that the person who persists in believing that Jesus is the Christ is revealing that they have been born of God.ⁱⁱⁱ

They belong to the family of God – they are spiritually born of God.

The evidence of that spiritual life is that ***they believe that Jesus is the Christ.***

To believe means to put one’s trust in; To believe that Jesus is the Christ – means – that you believe Jesus was more than a man, He was the Divine, anointed Messiah.

Listen, you’ll never be able to come to terms with who you are until you take by faith who Jesus is. One article entitled, “The Startling Beliefs of our Future Ministers” included the results of a survey taken among several major denominational seminaries.

- Do you believe in a physical resurrection? 54% said no.
- Do you believe in the virgin birth of Christ? 56% said no.
- Do you believe in the deity of Christ? 89% said no.
- Do you believe in the second coming of Christ? 99% said no.

The really troubling thing about that survey is that it was taken in 1961.^{iv}

John is actually going further than some kind of creed – with boxes you can check off; he’s pointing to a living Person!

In fact, I want you to notice that he uses the present tense – Jesus is the Christ!

Not just that He was . . . but even now – today – this is an implication of His resurrection – He *is*.

You might circle that powerful little word, “is” in this opening line.

Jesus is the Christ.

Listen, your unchanging, eternal identity in Christ is possible because of His unchanging eternal identity as Messiah.^v

John effectively says, “I don’t want you to doubt your eternal family kinship.”

Now notice next John’s reference to our family fellowship.

2. Our Family Fellowship

1b. And whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him;

That’s pretty self-explanatory isn’t it? If you love God, you’ll love His children. If you have fellowship with the Father, you’ll want to have fellowship with the Father’s family.

Jesus Christ had effectively said earlier to His disciples, “The world will know you are my disciples – if I could insert here – not by how many times you pray; how many verses you can quote or how many times you go to church – they really aren’t going to pick up on any of that, in fact there are other religious systems in the world that get together more often than you will – but what they are going to sense as uniquely Christ like – Jesus said, ***“they will know that you are My disciples by your love for one another.” (John 13:35)***

That was the remarkable characteristic referred to by Aristides as he wrote to the Roman Emperor.

The scoffer and unbeliever, Julian, the Roman emperor wrote in the fourth century of Christians saying, and I quote, “Their teacher has implanted the belief in them that they are all related.”

They actually consider themselves members of the same family.

And it isn’t a matter of compatibility – it’s a matter of genealogy – we happen to be brothers and sisters, born again into the family of God.

And just think of how different we are from each other.

We just started a brand new GreenHouse class this past week for new member prospects – one of the largest classes I’ve ever taught. We went around the room and found out that at least 100 of them, if not more, have begun attending in just the past 10 months or less – a few of them, right at 6 weeks.

And they have come from all over. They found us by driving by on Tryon Road – thinking we were a college; some of them were searching on the internet, some listening to radio, most of them invited by friends and family.

I did a survey and they came from a variety of backgrounds. They’ve come from California, Pennsylvania, Minnesota, China, West Africa, the Ukraine, Texas – that’s a foreign country.

How are we ever going to get along?

It’s fascinating to observe the early church in Antioch, in *Acts chapter 11*, the place where believers were first called Christians. It was a city where a church was planted and led by men from different ethnic, educational, societal and racial backgrounds.

And *Acts 11:21* says – I love this – **“And the hand of the Lord was with them.”**

They sent Barnabas from Jerusalem to check out this new church and *verse 23* says that **he came and witnessed the grace of God.**

The Apostle Paul would write to the Ephesians, **“I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints.”** (*Ephesians 1:15*)

- A true church doesn’t open its doors to only one social strata;
- A church doesn’t focus on just one age group;
- A church doesn’t pursue only one social demographic;
- A church doesn’t accept only one race or ethnic background.

That isn’t a church, that’s an embarrassment to the grace of God!

That isn’t the gospel either.

The gospel of God’s grace produces harmony in midst of diversity.

It isn’t a matter of uniformity – it is the principle of unity in sound doctrine (Titus 1:9).

In fact, the church isn’t really considered a mixture of races as much as it is considered the creation of a new race. A place where people gather

who’ve become **a royal priesthood – a holy nation, a people of His own, that we might show forth the praises of Him who called us out of darkness into a marvelous light** (1 Peter 2:9)

We are equally united by faith, made brothers and sisters in Christ.

We not only share a family kinship in Christ – we are to demonstrate a family fellowship – and if you really love the Father, you’re going to love His children too, no matter who they are or where they came from.

Throughout this letter, the Apostle John has stressed this characteristic of love within the family of God.

In chapter 2 he writes, **the one who loves his brother abides in the light. (2:10)**

In chapter 3 he writes, **by this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious – practicing righteousness and loving his brother. (3:10)**

In chapter 4, **If someone says, “I love God and hates his brother”, he’s a liar. (4:20)**

Also in chapter 4 he exhorts the church, **Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. (4:7)**

Minucius Felix, a Roman lawyer, living in the second century wrote this about the Christians – and he wrote with a sense of bewilderment – “They love each other without really being acquainted.”

Haven’t you found that to be true – you meet someone on the airplane or at work or at school and you find out they’re a Christian and there is an immediate kinship – although you are barely acquainted.

Now John throws a twist into the next phrase – still talking about the family fellowship – **notice verse 2. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God**

You’d think he’d write, “By this we know that we love God, when we love the children of God.”

Instead he writes, **“By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God.”** (*John 13:35*)

That’s not a slip of the pen.

He’s telling us that our family fellowship travels full circle. We love God the Father and we demonstrate it by loving each other; and we love each other and demonstrate it by loving God.

He’s also making an interesting point. He’s effectively saying, just as you can’t love God without loving each other, you really can’t love each other unless you love God.^{vi}

This is the full circle of the love of God . . . and love for each other . . . and this circle of love is exactly how we get along.

This is our family kinship . This is our family fellowship.

Thirdly, John reminds us of our family stewardship.

3. Our Family Stewardship

Notice the latter part of verse 2b. [we reveal our love for each other and for God the Father when we, notice –] observe His commandments; 3. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments . . .

The word for **commandment** here isn't referring to the Ten Commandments – or some list of Old Testament commandments uniquely given to the nation Israel.

The word for commandment is used more broadly as a reference to the Word of God.

In fact, our Lord even characterized His teaching as a **new commandment** (*John 15:10*).^{vii}

I want you to notice what John says we're to do with the commandments of God – those applicable to the New Testament believer; in *verse 2* he writes we are to **observe them** – the word **observe** means to practice them.

Then in *verse 3* he writes that loving God is evidenced by the way **we keep His commandments** – and the verb “to keep” is different.

It has the connotation of keeping watch over; carefully guarding them as a precious treasure.^{viii}

One author wrote that the first verb – **observing them** – had to do with actions; while the second verb – **keeping them** – has to do with our heart-attitudes.^{ix}

We carefully steward this treasure of God's word.

And we understand that God the Father commands us and directs us and prohibits us and guides us all because He loves us.

His commands are not weights to drag us down, one author writes, they are wings to help us fly.^x

Which is exactly the same verdict John is drawing here – notice the last part of *verse 3b. and His commandments are not burdensome.*

Burdensome is from *barus* (βαρὺς) – which carries the idea of an oppressive burden.^{xi}

It's the same word translated *savage*, used by the Apostle Paul, when he warned the Ephesian elders

of the coming savage wolves who would not spare the flock (*Acts 20:29*).

It's also the same word translated “heavy” used by the Lord when he described the heavy legalistic burdens the Pharisees were placing on the Jewish people. (*Matthew 23:4*)^{xii}

If you want to please God, here – carry this heavy burden . . .

Isn't that the contemporary view to this day? You're a follower of God? He's the great cosmic killjoy.

Christianity? What a drag. The truth is exactly the opposite.

There is no heavier burden than a guilty conscience; there's no greater misery than being ruled by the tyrant of sin.

Jesus Christ promised that His **truth would set us free?** (*John 8:32*). Not drag us down.

Jesus said – **Take my yoke upon you and learn from Me . . . for my yoke is easy and my burden is light.** (*He did! In Matthew 11:28-30*)

My yoke is easy – what does that mean?

In the Land of our Lord, oxen would plow and pull wearing a yoke made of wood. First they would be brought to a skilled carpenter who would take measurements of the shoulders and neck of that ox. The yoke was then cut out roughed out and sanded down. The ox would be brought back to have the yoke tried on again and the yoke would be carefully adjusted so that it would fit well – so that it wouldn't gall the neck or pull unevenly on one shoulder or another.^{xiii}

There was a legend that Jesus made the best yoke in all of Galilee – we can't be sure of that – but we do have the record of Justin Martyr, the second century church leader in Galilee, who wrote that farmers were still using yokes for their oxen that had been custom built by Jesus Christ 75 years earlier.

William Barclay writes that you might have seen over the door of his carpenter's shop a sign that read, “My yokes fit well.”

That was the idea.

Custom made.

Personally designed.

Not to burden us, but to build us up in the faith as we plow through the challenges of life.

Jesus also said, “My burden is light.”

That can only be true when we trust that God our Father has placed on us only what we can carry.

And when we love Him in return, surrounded by those who love each other and love Him in return, the heaviest burden is made light.

The Christian life isn't a drag . . . His demands become our ready delight because of our kinship with the Father and our fellowship with the family.

That doesn't mean it is easy . . . it is possible . . . but there is change involved and faith developed, but underneath is the steadfast love of Christ.

Craig Barnes, a pastor and author for many years wrote, "When I was a child, my father – a pastor – brought home a 12-year-old boy named Roger, whose parents had just died from a drug overdose. There was no relative to care for Roger, so my folks decided to adopt him and raise him as if he were one of their own sons.

At first it was quite difficult for Roger to adjust to his new home – an environment free of heroin-addicted adults. Every day, several times a day, I would hear my parents saying to Roger:

"No, no, that's not how we behave in this family."

"No, no; you don't have to scream or fight to get what you want."

"No, no, Roger, we expect you to show respect in this family."

And Roger began to change.

Craig Barnes makes the following point – Now did Roger have to make all those changes in order to become a part of our family?" No. He was made a part of the family simply by the grace of my parents. But did he then have to do a lot of hard work because he was in the family? You bet he did. And it was tough for him to change – everything he'd ever known was different – and he had to work at it. But he was motivated by gratitude for the incredible love and grace he'd received.

Do you have a lot of hard word to do now that the Spirit has made you a member of the family?

Certainly, but not in order to become a son or a daughter – you were made that by grace through faith in Christ. Oh, but now you've got a lot of work to do – and the Holy Spirit will often convict you when you slip back into the addictions of your old sinful ways . . . "No, no, that's not how we act in the family."^{xiv}

Now having expounded on these three verses, let me wrap up our study by simply reading again from Aristides defense of Christianity . . . and as I read it, now you can imagine how the words of John the Apostle have become a reality in the early church – and how we pray they will become a reality in our church today.

Aristides wrote, The Christians persuade others to become Christians by the love they have for them; and when they have become so, they call them without distinction, brothers. And if there is among them a man that is poor and needy, they fast two or three days that they may supply the needy with necessary food. They observe the commandment of their Messiah and they live honestly and soberly . . . they praise God for their food and their drink, they render Him thanks. Such is the law of the Christians and such is their manner of life.

That just sums up First John 5:1-3 doesn't it?

- Let me give you undeniable evidence in defense of Christianity – the way Christians respond in faith to Christ;
- the way they relate in love to each other;
- and the way they observe the commandments of Christ with praise and thanksgiving.

May it be said of us – such is the law of we Christians – and such is *our* manner of life today.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 9/15/2013 by Stephen Davey.

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i www.earlychristianwritings.com

ii Steve May, *The Story File* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2000), p. 246

iii Adapted from James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John* (Baker Books, 1979), p. 125

iv Charles R. Swindoll, *The Tale of the Tardy Oxcart* (Word Publishing, 1998), p. 480

v D. Edmond Hiebert, *The Epistles of John* (BJU Press, 1991), p. 224

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- vi Adapted from The Expositors Bible Commentary: Volume 12 (Regency Reference Library, 1981), p. 348
- vii Robert Lightner, The Epistles of John and Jude (AMG Publishers, 2003), p. 72
- viii John MacArthur, 1-3 John (Moody Publishers, 2007), p. 181
- ix Ibid
- x Joel Beeke, The Epistles of John (Evangelical Press, 2003), p. 178
- xi Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 794
- xii John Phillips, Exploring the Epistles of John (Kregel, 2003), p. 160
- xiii William Barclay, Matthew: Volume 2 (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 17
- xiv Craig Barnes, “The Blessed Trinity” (5-30-99); posted at www.preachingtoday.com/site/utilities/print.html?type=article&id=23702