

Reliable Witness

Jonathan K. Dodson | 1 John 1:1-4 | March 6, 2022

We've spent a month and a half seeking spiritual renewal, and we shouldn't stop. But there's a danger in focusing on spiritual renewal. What could go wrong?! *Our pursuit of renewal becomes closed off from our pursuit of one another.* We become hyper-focused on ourselves: do *I* feel renewed, am *I* beholding Christ, are people praying for *me*? But genuine renewal moves outward. That's why we'll be preaching thru *1 John*. John shows us that renewal overflows into relationship. He says things like: *Fellowship with the Father and Son leads to fellowship with one another. If Jesus laid down his life for us, we ought to lay down our lives for one another.* He pairs inner renewal with outer renewal. But, to enjoy that we have to be confident and clear about Jesus. If we have doubts about Jesus, we'll find it difficult to engage in spiritual renewal. So are the claims of Jesus reliable? Let's look at *Authoritative Testimony, Compelling Testimony, Experiential Testimony.*

Authoritative Testimony

This time of year skeptics of the Bible start appearing in popular culture: *Time*, *20/20* IG reels raising questions about the reliability of the Gospels and the resurrection. Well, the readers of this letter had their own doubts. We're told in chapter two that a group of

them became anti-Christ and sought to overturn Christian belief and left the church. That's happening today. The first two verses plunge right into issues of reliability: *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* (1:1). Can the Bible's claims about Jesus be trusted? It depends on if the testimony was reliable. These two verses seek to establish something historians and scholars like Richard Bauckham call **authoritative testimony**. First the **testimony**. John, the author and disciple of Jesus, says we *heard, saw* with our eyes, and *touched* with our hands *the word of life*. He's clearly talking about a person. Who? The Word of life: a reference to Jesus (John 1:1,4). John applying "the scientific method" to his witness: heard, saw, touched the historical Jesus. When John says he *saw* and *witnessed*, he is using legal terms used in courtroom deposition. He's going on record as a living witness. There is a growing segment of people who don't believe the holocaust happened. How do we actually know it happened? Because there are living witnesses who endured the camps, have the numbers on their arms, and give testimony. John is making a formal appeal to eyewitness testimony of Jesus as the word of life. He's saying, *I'm not making this up*. We saw Jesus act like a god, witnessed his resurrection. *But* how do we know he's not making it up? That he's reliable? **Authority**. We know his testimony

is reliable because it's public record. Anyone could have challenged it but no contemporary credible challengers come forward. There is eyewitness testimony, not just of John, but thousands of people who were alive at the time and witnessed Jesus. Who saw his miracles, heard his teachings, felt his touch. In fact, this eyewitness testimony isn't seriously challenged until well into the second century by people who didn't witness it. Why shouldn't we trust the 2nd century skeptics? That's like trusting a Russian soldier a hundred years from now to give an accurate account of the war in Ukraine. There's distance and bias. But isn't John biased? Not according to how ancient historians did history. Thucydides, Josephus, Tacitus believed true history could only be done *while the event was in living memory*, not a hundred years later. They also believed it was *better* to get the facts from *a person involved in those events*, John, because they had insider information a mild observer didn't. So by the standards of the time, this is an authoritative testimony that Jesus was God in the flesh.

Compelling Testimony

But is it compelling? Well, not to some. There were thousands of people who saw, heard, touched Jesus and failed to perceive his significance, to embrace his claims. The Gospels unblushingly report people leaving Jesus in unbelief, unwilling to trust his claims. But

those who did perceive his significance were compelled not only to trust him but to live lives of radical service, sacrifice, and virtue. Better humans. Why? They relied, not just on eyewitness testimony but on the *risen Christ*. Bring this forward. How might a post-Enlightenment culture respond? Jonathan Rauch a senior fellow of the Brookings Institute and atheist, says if we simply live by the scientific method, things we can see, hear, touch, we'll become like a walking Spock, Data, or Sherlock Holmes. We need another source to make us truly human. The rational worldview is inadequate. The scientific method inadequate. He points to Dr. Francis Collins: director of the National Institute of Health, cracked human genome *and* devout Christian saying “[When I compared Collins’ worldview with my own, I think mine is the more impoverished. He has access to two epistemic realms; I only one.](#)” He sees in Collins faith an enriching and more holistic way to know and live. What is it about Collins faith? Look back at two terms in verse 1: [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.](#) What is the Word of life? It’s an allusion to the opening line of John’s Gospel: [In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God](#) (Jn 1:1, 14). The *word of life* is God in the flesh, *the* uncreated become the creature, the transcendent become immanent. Collins is more human not less,

because his God became the one true human. Jesus was also *in the beginning*, a Hebraism referring to Jesus *eternal* nature. Nothing that began began before Jesus. He is the pre-existent, eternal God. Now that's something not just to relate to but to worship, to give your whole life to. People who worship this God become selfless not selfish, more human not less. How so? If Jesus is all that, God and flesh, you won't be ruled by lesser things, which is why John closes the letter by saying, *Little children, keep yourselves from idols* (5:16). An idol is a false, dehumanizing god. Think back with me over the past two years. How have you changed? Were you cagy, combative, outraged? *Uncharacteristically bold* behind digital walls? Being *right* might be your idol. *Attention* your functional god. You need to remember Jesus is God, not you. He is always right and always deserving of your attention. Maybe you liked the isolation? Have you struggled to reenter community, to worship with the church, love neighbors? *Comfort, safety* might be your idol. *Privacy* might have become your god, accountable only to yourself. No one to serve. You need to remember Jesus is flesh, relational. Privacy makes us selfish but the Word of life makes us selfless. Self-righteousness makes us judgmental but worshipping Jesus makes us humble. Just months ago I pulled up to this church and could not come in. I sat in my car and cried. I was so emotionally broken the thought of being with a group of people was paralyzing. Now I'm meeting

multiple people a week to love and serve them. Why? Because I'm great? No because Jesus is the word made flesh, human, *and* because Jesus is life, God. He met me when I was emotionally dead and brought me back to life. Renewal overflows into relationship. *Guard yourselves from idols* that dehumanize and devote yourself the Word of life.

Experiential Testimony

We've seen that eyewitness evidence for the claims of Jesus, *authoritative testimony*. That Jesus trumps false gods to make us truly human, *compelling testimony*. Finally, experiential testimony. Here's where the fountain overflows: *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* (1 Jn 1:3). Why did John spend time establishing an authoritative, compelling testimony? *So we can have fellowship.* What is **fellowship**? It is closeness that comes from sharing things. Think of going to a favorite restaurant with a friend, sharing the food. Going to a concert together and loving the music. Geeking out. But fellowship is more than sharing things; it's sharing ultimate things, the thing, the Word of life, the life made manifest, eternal life. Interchangeable ideas for John. Think about the last really satisfying conversation you had. You shared the deep things: Jesus takes the

conversation deeper, makes our bonds stronger. Anyone can hang out, but only the church can fellowship. How? Don't just listen to a **sermon**, explore its truths together. After the service is over: What do you think about 1 John? What stood out to you? Did you feel like God was speaking to you in any way? In **City Group**, don't settle for what's comfortable, small talk, go deeper: ask one another follow up questions. Why do you think that idol is alluring? How have you changed from the pandemic? But, we won't fellowship with one another if we're not fellowshiping with God. We'll just hang out. Did you notice John says *indeed* our fellowship with the Father and his Son? It's a point of emphasis. Experiential encounters with the father and son compel us to fellowship with one another. *Renewal overflows into relationship.* Fellowship is like an hourglass. It starts with God at the top and trickles down into relationship with others. And once we're full, we can even flip it and our fellowship with one another encourages fellowship with God. After you have the deep conversation you want to spend more time with God. But, what you can't do is start at the bottom and expect the grains to float up. We can't start with ourselves and expect to spark fellowship. Why? Because fellowship is sharing the ultimate thing, the God became flesh, that one who makes us truly human.