

Finding *Renewal* in the Love of God

Unit 6: “Living Renewal as a Testimony to the Eternal Life”

A Closing Note: Claiming the Incarnate Life

As John wrote the pages that would become the biblical book of 1 John, he had one thing in mind: encouraging and enabling his brothers and sisters to lay claim to the One True Life, a life that exists through Christ—to become one that **sees** that life, **claims it**, and **lives out** its essence before others and for others.

No one can **see** God without having **seen Christ**. Thus John argues that Christ on earth embodied a reality that could be seen, heard and touched! He was no allusion like so many were beginning to claim; he was real flesh and blood, yet the embodiment of God himself. In the same way the Spirit that lives in us is also real, **not counterfeit**, he writes! John stakes his reputation—as an apostle, an eye-witness, and one who walked with Jesus—on having seen, heard, and touched Jesus. At the time of the writing, his testimony represented the strongest evidence available.

However, **seeing** something and **staking a lasting claim** can be two very different experiences. In April of 1889, the U.S. government opened 200 million acres of Oklahoma Territory to settlers. Tens of thousands of men and women (and children) lined up for the opportunity to claim plots of up to 160 acres in size, land considered by many to be the best unoccupied sections in the United States. However, not everyone who came, not even everyone who managed to get their stake into the ground, ended up with a lasting claim. Many “claims” were later ruled counterfeit—lies. Some of the settlers had “jumped the gun,” even sneaking into the territory ahead of others to plant stakes well ahead of the rush. Additionally, a provision required these “boomers” to live on the land and to improve it in order to receive clear title. For one reason or another, many found this impossible; because they did not **live on the land**, they could not fulfill the contract. Still, thousands others made a legal claim, pitched their tent, and built their permanent dwelling in the red dust of Oklahoma. The land became their possession.

John underlines the necessity of a true claim. We might “claim” to love God or our brother, but not every claim stands the test of authenticity. What we say can be judged a lie if our lives do not tell the same story. Our verbal language matters far less than our actions. To **claim** the Christian life means to **live like Christ**. God gave his son; Christ gave his life; I must love as they do. “Let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth,” John writes.

In the same way, one might measure my faith. I cannot merely “claim” to believe; I must **possess** the life I profess. My life must become an **expression** of God himself. God planted his stake in my heart—his Holy Spirit; that spirit is real and not counterfeit; it empowers; it makes me “like him.” Thus we love one another and in doing so we **profess** that we are children of God.

As representatives of God's incarnation, we carry his witness of eternal life into the world. Our job is "to be" that which can be seen, heard and touched, the reflection of God and his Son. That is enough. In 1990, I suffered a severe depression for which I sought treatment in a psychiatric day hospital—five weeks of treatment. Though my life had been filled with exploring different ways and means by which I might testify regarding Christ in my life, I realized I was in no position at that time to concentrate on evangelism. How could I, a mental patient, pay attention to my own issues and healing **and** successfully relate his story to other patients? Deep within myself, I recognized that this must be a time of surrender and listening. Thus, I promised God: I will not do one thing to help these people; I promise. I will walk with you every minute I am here; I will listen intently for your voice; I will pray with all my doctors, but I will do NOTHING to direct my own healing or the healing of another patient. I will trust you to heal me. I will also trust you with them; if you want to help them, you must do it yourself.

Those five weeks became an incredible tutorial on God and his desire to work in and through me. One woman asked almost daily if I would pray with her; she believed that my prayer for her would turn the tide in her healing. I refused: "I am a patient here, too," I said. "I cannot help you." The words almost stuck in my throat. Another woman returned each Monday, desiring to tell us all of the multiple times she had attempted to take her own life over the weekend. On Mondays, I went the other way every time I saw her coming. A young man in my group therapy class was also suicidal. Since group therapy is intended as a time for patients to share observations, I allowed myself to say one day: "John, if you want to die because you loathe the person you are, God has made a plan for killing that man." He was startled. "What do you mean?" he asked. "I mean, that baptism covers the same territory. Baptism is the burial of a dead man—the person dies, no longer to live in this life. In baptism, we surrender our lives and Jesus gives us his." That was all.

Yet somehow, by walking in his presence and trusting him, all these people got the message anyway. One day leaving my Bible class, another patient—an Episcopal priest—walked up beside me. "You know more Bible than any Episcopal priest I know." I was startled. I did not remember sharing much at all of what I knew. On the day I was released, the woman who was wanting me to pray with her, caught me. "Today," she said, "today, will you pray with me?" I agreed. "Thank you," she said after our prayer. "I truly believe God has begun to heal me. Thank you so much!" And John... John returned from a weekend shortly after our encounter in group to tell us that he had been baptized. I did not get to "teach" John or spend even one minute counseling the woman who continued to ask for prayer. I had not attempted to teach anything in Bible class; I had only commented as called upon. Yet God had proven his competence once again. While I was busy holding myself in check to keep from "helping these people," God had done it himself. And what a blessing it was to hear that somehow he had also used me.

I have had other instruction similar to this, so much so that I now believe that if I hold **myself** back and merely **live** the life I know before the world, that **is** God's evangelism plan. He

speaks louder and more eloquently than anything I might say or write. I must concentrate on claiming the real life, trusting him, and living that life among those who are seeking to see, hear, and touch the Father. Then, I must trust him to speak and those who see him to respond. Not everyone will, I know. But, as my mother used to say, "*If you can't hear me, you just aren't listening.*"