

The Fellowship
1 John 1:1–4
March 5, 2017

Imagine with me a church in a large city, filled with godless images and practices where no gospel work had ever taken place. The church, although fairly small, has had some influence in the community, even creating quite a stir about their message of salvation in Christ alone. Opposition arose toward the church but the congregation joyfully trusted in Christ and banded together for encouragement and support.

Members of the congregation came from all walks of life and from every social strand. For many years they lived with much unity as a visible demonstration to the power of the gospel. But with the next generation, some began to listen to competing voices alluring them toward teaching contrary to the gospel. Others grew slack in their study of the Scriptures and discussion of foundational teaching, so that they questioned what they had been taught concerning Christ and the gospel. As that happened, a few enthusiastic teachers with a different message captured their attention and lured them away. Emphasizing special experiences and secret knowledge, some found it more interesting than the gospel. Consequently, they split away from the church that had nurtured them and where they had confessed faith in Christ in order to embrace a teaching contrary to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Those remaining struggled. What was the truth? What experience was legitimate? Their friends who left still remained in the community. The teachers that influenced them still spoke out against what those in the church confessed believing concerning Christ. The former members even derided those who remained in the church as outdated and archaic. Some doubted, while others wrestled with assurance in Christ. How would they recover the joy, fellowship, and unity that they had known in earlier years?

That imaginary story is not imaginary. That's what happened a generation or more after Paul wrote to the church at Ephesus. Now, in the later years of his life, the Apostle John ministered to the Ephesian congregation. False teachers had arisen that drew people away. John declared of them, "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us" (2:19). So a group split from the church that John, without hesitation, explained that they did not belong to Christ or to the true body of Christ. How could he make that kind of statement? What were the criteria for being genuine believers in Christ?

That *split* had shaken the church. It made many question their relationship to the Lord. Some wrestled with the essentials of the gospel. So John wrote his epistle to bring them back to certainty in the gospel, assurance of relationship to Christ, and joyful fellowship with one another. But assurance is needed now as then. First John addresses it.

The gospel of Jesus Christ proclaimed and believed brings us into joyful fellowship with the church and with the Father and Son. How does that happen? Let's think about the message proclaimed and the fellowship explained.

I. The message proclaimed

John's approach in this letter or what some call a treatise on assurance differs from Paul. We're accustomed to Paul's more linearly organized letters. John, on the other

hand, has organization but it's more spiral than linear. In other words, he doesn't pull the lever and drop everything on you at once. He layers his message of assurance by considering the Person of Christ, issues of sin and obedience, relationships in the body, evidences of false teaching, and characteristics of true knowledge of Christ. That's why he starts addressing assurance in the first chapter and then in the last writes, "These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life" (5:13). That wasn't a new subject. That *was the subject* throughout, along with other matters associated with assurance.

John also writes with the teaching and influence of the false teachers and those that split from the church in view. We'll keep referring back to them throughout our study because they spur his statements, as he writes toward the end of the first century.

John also does something striking in the first paragraph. He begins with four clauses in verse 1 that do not get a verb to explain them until verse 3—"we **proclaim.**" He leaves us momentarily hanging. Verse 2 is parenthetical and explains what he means by the phrase, "**concerning the Word of Life.**" When he returns to verse 3 after his parenthesis, he repeats the essence of verse 1 and then states the action (noted by the verb) he's taking in this epistle. His proclamation leads to fellowship for the church and joy for John and his brothers as they serve the churches.

1. The "who" of the message

John speaks about *someone*. He calls Him the one that "**was from the beginning,**" "**the Word of Life,**" "**the life,**" "**the eternal life,**" one "**which was with the Father,**" and one "**manifested to us.**" He does the same in the prologue to his Gospel: "The Word," "the Word . . . with God," "the Word [that] was God," the one in whom "was life," "the Light of men," "the true Light," and "the Word became flesh" (John 1:1-14). Those terms capture both the *who* and the *what* of his subject.

To refer to "**the beginning**" makes us ask, what beginning? The beginning of the gospel? The beginning of the church? The beginning of his letter to the church? Certainly, that would be true in each case. But he has something more intensely important in mind. "**What was from the beginning**" combines with "**which was with the Father**" to point to the Lord Jesus Christ as God. The crescendo in John 1:1 ends with "and the Word was God." Here John uses "**beginning**" as another way of expressing that Jesus is eternally God. He was not, as some of the ancient heretics taught, a man that had a God-consciousness or an unusually good man upon whom the Spirit of Christ came at his baptism or one who was only a created being. This heresy came full throttle in the early 4th century by the teaching of Arius who denied Jesus' deity. Under the leadership of Athanasius and in the subsequent Nicene Creed (A.D. 381), Jesus was declared to be "very God of very God," while Arius was condemned as a heretic. But, unfortunately, Arianism lives on among Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Unitarians, and others.

So what's the point of insisting on Jesus being God? A mere man would have the same sin problem that all of us have and need a Savior like the rest of us. The massive reality of our sin and separation from God meant that *only God* could give sufficient value to His death at the cross to atone for the sins of the world. Only God, *God Incarnate*, could satisfy (*propitiate*, 2:2) God concerning our sins and His eternal justice. So if Jesus is *less than God* then He is less than a Savior, which means we have no salvation apart from Him being the one, true God.

Yet the major heresy plaguing this church was that of denying the full humanity of Jesus. Some taught that He only *appeared* to be man (Docetists). Others, because they considered anything material inherently evil taught that it was impossible for Jesus to be a human being (pre-Gnosticism). But for Him to fulfill the Law on our behalf and to die in our place at the cross, He had to be a human being. God in His nature as God cannot die. For that to happen, God would of necessity become a man (Heb 2:14–18).

So John describes the real humanity of Jesus. **“What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life.”** The tedious way that he describes physical sight of and contact with Jesus Christ—both before and after His resurrection—affirms that God the Son became what He was not, a human being, in order that we might become what we are not, children of God. And, importantly, He forever remains a man.

To paraphrase and catch the language, ‘What we have heard and keep hearing as though His teaching rings in our ears, what we have seen with our eyes and continue to see Him as though He were still before us—not as a figment of our imagination but as a real person, what we have looked at when the crucified Christ rose from the dead and we touched and handled Him to know that we weren’t feeling an apparition but genuine flesh.’ Then he adds, **“The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us”** [NIV]. The co-equality with the Father is undiminished by the appearance of the Son in the Incarnation as a real person. Rather John rejoices that God would send His Son.

The Gospel writers help us to see both the deity and humanity of Jesus. John declares Him as Creator while manifesting His power as God in the miracles and resurrection. Matthew, Mark, and Luke show His power over nature by calming the winds and sea and walking on the water and feeding the multitudes, over demons by casting them out, and over life and death by healing the sick and diseased and by raising people from the dead. The Gospels also show His humanity by Him asleep in the stern of the little boat on the sea, anguishing over hardness of hearts, crying at Lazarus’ death, eating with the disciples, and finally, dying on the cross and then being bodily raised from the dead.

The *who* of John’s message is Jesus Christ, the eternal God, who became a man for the rest of eternity. Salvation depends upon this message of His two natures in one person.

2. The “what” of the message

Notice the phrases that John uses: **“the Word of Life,” “the life,” “the eternal life,”** and each of these describes both a person that appears and a work that this person accomplishes. **“Life”** especially emphasizes union with Jesus Christ. What some people call Christianity is not Christianity. We must not fall into the trap of letting the world dictate what a Christian is or is not. The Bible alone declares what Christianity looks like. It’s about life in Christ. What John does throughout this letter is to show how that union with or relationship to Christ works out in how we live, who we gather with, how we love and serve, and how Christ affects what we believe and how we behave.

But something very different showed up in those who had split from the church. The epistle demonstrates that they had rejected either the deity and/or humanity of Christ (1:1–3; 4:1–6)—*so they had a faulty view of who Jesus is*. They had rejected the necessity for Jesus’ death and resurrection; they scorned the idea of Jesus as the propitiation for our sins (2:2)—*so they had a faulty view of what Jesus has done to save sinners*. They had

rejected a life of obedience and holiness characterizing right relationship with God (2:3–6, 15–17)—*so they had a faulty view of sanctification and assurance*. They had rejected the emphasis by Jesus that loving your brother gives evidence of real discipleship (2:7–11; 3:11–18; John 13:35)—*so they had a faulty view of the church*.

The one who is “**Life . . . eternal life**” in Himself, gave His “**life**” to deliver those dead in trespasses and sins from condemnation so that they might have “**eternal life**” (Eph 2:1–3). In other words, *it is the Life that gave His life so that we might have life with Him forever*. That’s the reason for the cross where Jesus bore our sins and became satisfaction for us before God. It’s the reason for the resurrection so that in His life we might experience life. But notice that the “**Life**” is not some abstract philosophical concept. The Life is a Person. Jesus is eternal life in Himself. That’s why John later writes, “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life” (5:11–12). Do you have the Son? Do You have His life? Does He have you?

II. The fellowship experienced

John explains why he writes and proclaims what he has seen and heard, “**so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.**” While those who split from the church pranced about boasting of how they were now favored by the spurious teachers in the community, and how they had been initiated into spiritual secrets, John takes the church to a higher plane. We’re proclaiming these things so that you will have fellowship with us.

1. The foundation for fellowship

Without backtracking to repeat what we’ve just seen, I want you to notice the connection to what John has written and fellowship, “**What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that . . .**” The purpose clause makes it clear. If you would have fellowship with John the aged apostle and with those who joined with him in testifying to the person, death, and resurrection of Jesus, and if you’d have fellowship with the Father and the Son, then *it all depends on the message proclaimed*. If you pay no attention to the message to hear it, believe it, receive it, and live in it, then it matters not what group you are part of, how much theology you’ve read, how articulate you are, how morally upstanding you might be. If the message of the gospel has not taken root in your life so that Christ is your very life, then you won’t have fellowship with those who believe the gospel.

Here is a warning against presumption. It’s marvelous to be around people that love Jesus. There are unbelievers who actually enjoying being around Christians because the Christians treat them well. But being around Christians does not make you one. Only Jesus, through trusting Him in the proclamation of the gospel, can make you a Christian.

2. The relationships in fellowship

What’s involved in fellowship? It means that you have things in common, that you participate together in some particular things, and that you’re sharing life together. There is a sense, in a non-biblical way, that people from the same workplace or who cheer for the same sports team has things in common and so have a sort of fellowship with each other. But that’s far from what John means.

Christian fellowship means that we don't live our lives in isolation from one another [Curtis Vaughan, *FSGC: 1,2,3 John*, 24]. John Stott wrote that this fellowship "denotes that common participation in the grace of God, the salvation of Christ and the indwelling Spirit which is the spiritual birthright of all Christian believers" [TNTC: *The Epistles of John*, 63]. That's why John explains that this fellowship rooted in believing the gospel message that brings us to Christ is a relationship with fellow believers and with the Godhead. **"And indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ."** The powerful and elite of the world may pal around with more powerful and elite, sipping and dipping and clamoring for attention. But the Lord Jesus has brought us into relationship with the Father, Son, and Spirit, and with all of those redeemed by Him. We share life together, not just for a few passing years until someone puts us in the ground and utters a few niceties over our decaying corpse. We share life together now in preparation for sharing life together forever.

So just a few weeks ago, Karen and I spent the day with a couple that we did not know before traveling to Scotland. Ray was brought up in a broken family and in foster homes. Julia had been a Roman Catholic. Jesus graciously saved them. By His mercy, as a teenager the Lord saved me, and for Karen as a 30-year old pastor's wife, the Lord saved her. So the four of us spent the day together sharing life in Christ, talking about the outworking of the gospel, praying with each other, laughing together, enjoying eating and drinking together, discussing gospel work in Scotland, Memphis, and around the world. It was quite evident that the Holy Spirit united us and brooded among us with His compassion, grace, and love. We left with a deep sense of love for each other and gratitude to the Lord for His kindness in saving us and bringing us together in fellowship.

But the most enriching fellowship to me is that which we enjoy together as a body of believers, living life together in Christ, sharing our joys and sorrows, participating in one another's lives and in ministry and mission and worship and laughter and tears and joys.

That's why John wrote to the Ephesian church: **"so that our joy may be made complete."** It was a joy in sharing the good news with them but even more, a joy in knowing that they had received the good news of life in Christ, and now they would fellowship together in this life and the next. Do you know the fellowship that belongs to those who are in Christ? It begins in and develops in the good news of Jesus.