

“The Right Companions” (1 John 1:1-4)

The year 1993 was one of the most important years of my life. I graduated from college, married Lori, and then entered seminary. Upon entering seminary, I discovered that I needed an internship. Fortunately, the internship director set me up at the fastest growing church in Washington State. When I arrived at this church, I was overwhelmed by all the people and the activities. I asked permission to begin their first ever Inductive Bible Study class. It was at this time that I met Victor Lansaw. Victor and his wife, Tammy, began attending my class. They quickly encouraged others to join as well. They believed in me, a young, wet-behind-the-ears, 22-year-old kid. Rather quickly, the Lansaws informed me that they felt led by the Lord to financially contribute to Lori and me. Victor also did guest follow-up with me. He was an amazing friend and ministry partner. When I graduated from seminary, it was Victor, along with the adult class that I taught who purchased a black Day-Timer for me...the same Day-Timer that I use today. Victor will always have a special place in my heart, because he believed in me at the beginning of my public ministry. I like to say that he is a part of my “inner circle.” Victor would be a great person to write a book about what Keith Krell believes is critical to the Christian life. He knows me and shares my heart.

The relationship that I share with Victor is similar to the relationship that Jesus had with the apostle John. John was a fisherman who met Jesus at the beginning of His ministry, and from that time until the resurrection and ascension he was very close to the Lord.¹ In fact, John became a member of the inner circle that included Peter and James. It was John who became known as “the beloved disciple.” This is expressed most clearly on two occasions: at the Last Supper when John laid his head on His Jesus’ chest and at the crucifixion when Jesus told John to take care of Mary, His own mother.

You will be forgiven for assuming that John is some mamsy-pamsy, girlie-girl type of man. Yet, nothing could be further from the truth. John was one of the “sons of thunder.” Undoubtedly, this expressed his volatile nature and strong will. John was a man of uncanny perseverance. It was John who made it to the foot of the cross with Christ. John has also written five very important New Testament books: The gospel of John, 1, 2, 3 John, and Revelation. The book that we will begin today, 1 John, is the most in-your-face, nitty-gritty, down-and-dirty book in the entire Bible. John does not hesitate to “call it like it is” or even “put his readers in their place” when he deems it necessary (1:6, 8; 2:4, 15, 22-23; 3:6-9, 10-12). So please, whatever you do, do not accuse John of being effeminate because he will go after you! I can assure you that this first letter will serve as a wake-up call for you and me.

Today, we will be looking at 1 John 1:1-4.² When you examine this opening paragraph, you will be surprised and presumably amazed to discover there are no words of introduction!³ There is not a single word of greeting to anyone, anywhere. There are no niceties of small talk! John wastes no time, he pulls no punches, he launches straight into his subject. This guy can’t wait to talk about Jesus!⁴ In this prologue, John shares with us a simple equation: Truth + Fellowship = JOY. Three concepts, three words, and three priorities that are all essential for you and me to be spiritually alive in our relationship with God and others. In these verses, we will learn how to translate Christology into personal biography.

1. Build a firm foundation (1:1-2). Less than two weeks ago, our family enjoyed a wonderful week in Cannon Beach, OR. On our final day, we went to the beach one last time and watched our kids at play. While my oldest son, Joshua, was working in the sand I approached him and asked, “Joshua, what are you doing?” He replied, “I’m building a firm foundation.” I said, “That’s great! There’s nothing more important than a firm foundation.” Like Joshua, the apostle John also understood the importance of a firm foundation. The important difference is Joshua built on sand while John built on Christ and His message. Listen to John’s testimony in 1:1: **“What was from the beginning, 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.”**

An obvious question is: Why does John use the word “what” or “that” (NIV)? Is John writing about someone or something? The answer is: “Yes. He is writing about both.” John probably spoke of Christ as “what” rather than “He” because he wants to emphasize here the content of the message about Christ rather than the person of Christ.⁵ “What was from the beginning” is John’s abstract way of referring to Jesus, just as in his gospel John begins with “in the beginning was the Word...and the Word was God.”⁶ But it also refers to the beginning of the Christian message—the gospel of Jesus Christ (Mark 1:1).

It is worth noting that the main verb which governs all of these phrases is “we proclaim” (*apangellomen*), in 1:3. Since the verb “proclaim” is not found in 1:1 most English versions do not include it in the translation of 1:1. However, this is important for the proper understanding of the relative clauses in 1:1, because the main verb “proclaim” in 1:3 makes it clear that all of the relative clauses in 1:1 and 3 are the *objects* of the author’s proclamation to the readers rather than the *subjects*.⁷

Now notice the progression in sensory perception: heard ⇒ seen ⇒ looked upon (a word which goes even deeper than mere ocular perception) ⇒ handled. John emphasizes that both he and the other apostles were eyewitnesses to this incredible event of God entering into human history through the person of Jesus Christ. This apostolic witness is why John uses the pronoun “we” here instead of just “I.” He uses four verbs that describe his own experience with Christ.

- John heard the call from Jesus to come follow Him and to be a fisher of men. He heard the voice of Jesus teaching with God’s own authority; he heard Jesus declare to people that their sins were forgiven; and he heard the sound of the whip Jesus used to drive the money changers out of the Jewish Temple.
- John saw the many miracles Jesus performed. He saw the transfiguration and the garden of Gethsemane unfold. He had seen Jesus’ arrest, crucifixion, burial, and resurrection. He saw it.
- John had also looked at it. This word means to stare intently at something, to study it and contemplate what it means. John had stared in amazement at Jesus Christ after His resurrection from the grave on Easter Sunday. He gazed intently, rubbing his eyes to make sure it wasn’t a hallucination or a ghost.
- John had touched Jesus with his own hands. He had placed his hand on Christ’s shoulder, laid his head on His chest. After Jesus died and rose, he touched His resurrected body.

Because of John and the other apostles’ experience with Christ, they stand as reliable eyewitnesses to proclaim to us what they heard, what they saw, and what they touched. This is why John’s fellow disciples all met untimely and brutal deaths—because of this testimony. They truly believed that Jesus was real. To this day, this remains one of the most definitive proofs for the Christian faith.

Verse 1 concludes by referring to “the Word of life,” which likely refers to the message about Jesus Christ, namely, the gospel.⁸ In today’s high-tech, media-driven world, when we wish to convey a message to someone either verbally or electronically, we communicate with them through the medium of words. John, in a stroke of genius, is confirming that the message of Jesus Christ is THE word from God to us.

In 1:2, John continues his proclamation: **“and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us.”** Twice in this verse, John records that Jesus’ life was “manifested”⁹ or “made visible” to us. John moves from seeing ⇒ testifying ⇒ proclaiming. For example, a crime might take place but if I don’t see it I can’t talk about it. On the other hand, I might see it but decide not to tell anyone. If, however, the police suspect that I have seen the crime, I might receive a subpoena to “testify” in the courtroom as to what I have seen. I’ll talk if you force it out of me. But to “proclaim” is a very proactive declaration. There is no subpoena behind this word (cf. Acts 4:19-20).¹⁰ We proclaim Christ with zeal and freedom.

The Christian faith must be based on time-tested truth. Living in a multi-cultural, multi-faith society as we do, the tendency is for the people of God to almost apologize for their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. We can often dilute or blunt the impact of our faith because we dread being marginalized in the local community. We live in fear of being shunned in the workplace. We do not like to be rejected; we want to fit in with the crowd. Yet, John's powerful argument is that we have nothing to be embarrassed about.¹¹

On the contrary, we are to boldly proclaim that Jesus is the only way that man can have fellowship with God. It is critical to understand that fellowship must be on God's terms—through Jesus as He really is. This makes sense, doesn't it? If you invite me into your home, I can't necessarily do as I please. You may have rules. You may want me to take my shoes off. Now I may think, "Well, I don't require people to take their shoes off in my home. That seems a little much." But it really doesn't matter what I think, does it? I can do whatever I want in my house, but if I want to fellowship with you, I must do things your way. Well, God says, "If you want to come to My house and live with Me forever, you must do things my way. And this means trusting in My Son, the Lord Jesus Christ." If you have never trusted in the person and work of Christ, I urge you to do so today. Eternal life can only be found by believing in what Jesus has accomplished for you.

[In 1:1-2, John has emphasized the need to build a strong foundation. Now he moves on to anchor to everyday experience, these foundational truths concerning Christ. There are serious implications for us surrounding these doctrines in the rough and tumble of everyday life. In 1:3-4, John is going to prompt us to...]

2. Locate the right companions (1:3-4). In these two verses, John is going to inform us that "it's all about *who* you know." He is going to demonstrate that there is a practical application ensuing from the apostolic testimony to the lives of his readers, for learning and living are two sides of the same coin. In 1:3, John writes, "**What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that [purpose] you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.**" Verse 3 provides the purpose statement for the book of 1 John.¹² The purpose can really be boiled down into one word—fellowship. The word that John uses for "fellowship" is the Greek word *koinonia* (cf. 1:6 and 7). This particular word was used in classical Greek as a favorite expression for the intimate bond enjoyed by a couple in their marital relationship. It also conveys the idea of participation in a more general sense: it is a word that is particularly appropriate when used to speak of a business partnership or a joint tenancy of an apartment. I suppose John could look back to his early days when he and his big brother, James, were shareholders in the family fishing business.¹³ It was their relationship to their father and so to each other in the family that gave them a common concern. In the best sense of the word, that is what fellowship is. It is sharing together in the family. It means we have something in common.¹⁴

Fellowship can be experienced on two levels: vertical and horizontal. Vertically speaking, John explains that the fellowship he and the apostles had was with God the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ. God is not a distant entity, unknowable and implacable. He is personal. He is a person who knows and can be known. There are those who say that because God is transcendent, or beyond us, that we cannot know Him. However, Francis Schafer says, "While we cannot know God completely we can know Him truly." Schafer makes the point that while we know other humans truly we do not know them fully. Horizontally speaking, if we believe what John and the other apostles believe we have fellowship with God and we have fellowship with the apostles and other believers. It is only by knowing Jesus that you can have fellowship with the saints.

The purpose of 1 John is experiencing intimate and constant fellowship with God the Father and His Son, Jesus Christ (1:3).¹⁵ In the context of 1 John, fellowship (*koinonia*) is sharing in God's character and nature in our daily experience.

Fellowship is sharing the good things of God. When the apostles were with Jesus He talked to them, encouraged them, rebuked them, and guided them. They observed Him, picked up His ways, talked to Him, and asked Him questions. For three years they shared everything with Jesus.¹⁶

Why isn't the Holy Spirit mentioned in the fellowship? Does He not have fellowship with the Father and the Son? Of course, the answer is, "Yes, He does." But the job description of the Spirit is to glorify the Son. The Spirit never glorifies Himself. For that reason He is omitted in the account of fellowship with God.¹⁷

It is important for us to realize that those who hold solid theology should live it out in practical ways. What Scripture is saying here, and the point John will make throughout this book, is that if you really have fellowship with God you will be in right relationship with God's people. This means looking for opportunities to build people up in Christ.

Of course, when John says "that you also may have fellowship with us," he speaks of horizontal fellowship, that is, believers sharing with believers. But he goes further in his concept of Christian fellowship to qualify it as fellowship "with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ."

That's not the type of fellowship John wants to share. He wants to share what the apostles experienced with their heavenly Father and His Son, Jesus Christ. Small groups are a big ministry in churches today, and well they should be. Jesus was a small group leader. And when these groups get together, the members will often talk about things they have in common—their children, golf, business, Rotary, political views. But even though these are Christians sharing with each other, this is not what John means by Christian fellowship. In the 1 John sense, it's not Christian fellowship until Christians begin sharing with each other their experiences with Jesus and their heavenly Father. Only this kind of fellowship feeds the need of the regenerated human spirit. Not that there is anything wrong with sharing other things we have in common, but until we share on the deepest level our spiritual experiences, we will often leave the group that night with the sense that we really haven't connected, that something is missing.

In 1:4, John closes his introduction by explaining, "**These things we write, so that [purpose] our joy may be made complete.**" Joy is the product of fellowship with God. When there is no joy, there is no fellowship (cf. John 15:11; 16:24). It is worth noting that three times in the upper room, with His crucifixion only a handful of hours away, Jesus spoke to His disciples of the joy that awaited them (John 16:20, 22, 24). The joy that He was talking about was a total joy, an indestructible joy that can only come through the cross.

John's primary concern in this letter is the joy his readers can have even before eternity. When he says "complete" or "full" in 1:4, he writes in such a way that he means a state of fullness. And he says this is specifically one of his reasons for putting all this on parchment.

The apostles were seeking to have their joy filled to overflowing. That ought to be the goal of Christian leaders. I must desire to see you experience fellowship with God and with His children. This must be true for all the leaders in our church.

In summary, John wrote as an apostolic eyewitness. He identified two dangers that are still prevalent in the church today. One is the assumption that Christian fellowship is possible without common belief in Christ. The other is the assumption that someone can have a relationship with God without a relationship with Jesus.¹⁸ John wrote this epistle so his readers might join in the fellowship with God that is possible only for those who have seen God as the apostolic eyewitnesses of what the incarnate Christ had done. He has the heart of a pastor which cannot be completely happy so long as some of those for whom he feels responsible are not experiencing the full blessings of the gospel.

The spiritual life is not a rigid obedience to a set of rules in order to be saved, stay saved, or to prove to someone that we are saved! It should not be a harsh, cold, fearful, guilt-ridden responsibility. The spiritual life is a reverent relationship with a Ruler who has already saved and secured us. It should be a happy, warm, loving, and gracious response.¹⁹

What exactly is the joy? How can we define it? The dictionary definition of the word is not entirely helpful. Look it up and you find synonyms like, “gladness,” “delight,” and “happiness.” The problem is that our conception of these words is often circumstantial. That is, we tend to think that joy is something that we experience when things are going our way. We tend to think of joy as a kind of giddy, “yippee!” feeling we get when life is at its most pleasurable moments. It’s a superficial, temporary happiness tied to temporary circumstances. It’s good, but it’s not biblical joy. In contrast, biblical joy has nothing to do with temporary circumstances. “Joy” is inner contentment regardless of external circumstances (2 John 12; 3 John 4). It is an abiding peace, an inner contentment, a settled satisfaction, a joy so deep, so anchored, so solid, that troubles cannot touch it. In fact, biblical joy seems most evident in the midst of hardship. Biblical joy shines brightest when life circumstances cannot possibly explain it.²⁰

One of the buzzwords in the world and the church is “community.” Both unbelievers and believers are longing for community. That’s why there is everything from bars to chat rooms. But the world can’t have either fellowship or joy. Yet, this is what the world is searching for. In Ps 16:11b, the Bible says, “You will make known to me the path of life; in Your presence is fullness of joy; in Your right hand there are pleasures forever.” If we want what we so desperately need, we must accept God’s terms. As we seek to offer others the Word of Life, we must also present the simple equation: Truth + Fellowship = JOY. Only then can we translate Christology into biography.

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Scripture Reading

1 John 1:1-4; John 1:1-18
John 13:1-38
John 14:1-31
John 15:1-27
John 16:1-33
John 17:1-26
2 Peter 1:12-21

Study Questions

1. Jesus Christ is the firm foundation of John's testimony (1:1-2). What was it that I heard, saw, examined, or touched that influenced me to believe in Christ? Why is it important to base my faith in Jesus on the biblical revelation of Him? What current errors violate this? How can I share Jesus' life and message with others this week?
2. The most recent issue of *Christianity Today* states that there is a growing interest in theology among young people. Why is this? Is theology really important? If so, why? Why must theology and practice always be wed? What can happen when they're separated?
3. Biblical fellowship with God and man must be grounded in Jesus Christ (1:3). When have I experienced genuine Christian fellowship (i.e., fellowship where Christ was central)? What factors made this experience so meaningful? What can I do to facilitate authentic Christian fellowship in the lives of believers around me? How will I step out in faith this week and facilitate fellowship? Whom will I seek to have fellowship with?
4. John had a tremendous passion to proclaim Christ so that his readers could experience authentic fellowship with God and with one another. Who do I desire to experience authentic Christian fellowship with who is currently not a believer? Pray for an opportunity to share with that individual what I have experienced firsthand in my relationship with God.
5. Joy is the product of fellowship with God (1:4; cf. John 15:11; 16:20, 22, and 24). What is the difference between joy and happiness? In what ways do I struggle with joy? When have I experienced biblical joy? Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6; Hebrews 12:2; James 1:2; and 1 Peter 1:6. How do these verses remind me that I can be joyful in all circumstances?

Notes

¹ Jesus loved all of His disciples, but several of them had greater capacity to respond to His love than others. Jerry Vines, *Exploring 1-2-3 John* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1989), 13.

² 1 John 1:1-4 of the prologue constitutes a single sentence in the Greek language. Scholars down throughout time have concluded that this section is the most difficult and complicated Greek of all of John's writings in terms of structure. Johannine scholar, Dr. Hall Harris writes, "Certainly the four opening verses of 1 John constitute the most difficult and complicated Greek of all the Johannine literature in the NT in terms of *structure* (Revelation presents more difficulties of vocabulary, imagery, and grammatical concord). See W. Hall Harris, "The Prologue to 1 John (1:1-4) *Part 1: Grammar and Structure of the Prologue.*"

³ Most of the 21 NT letters begin by stating who the letter is from, who the letter is addressed to, followed by a blessing or a prayer. In fact, John's other two letters in the Bible—2nd and 3rd John are models of this ancient letter writing formula. But here we find something very different, something that almost sounds like the beginning of John's gospel that he wrote before this letter. This unexpected beginning is probably written this way because John is correcting misunderstandings of his gospel, and he knew that as soon as he started writing like this his readers would immediately remember his earlier words, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God" and so forth.

⁴ Sam Gordon, *Living in the Light: 1.2.3 John* (Greenville, SC: Trans World Radio, 2001), 24.

⁵ Dr. Thomas L. Constable, *Notes on 1 John* (<http://www.soniclight.com/constable/notes/pdf/1john.pdf>, 2006), 5.

⁶ Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John: NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 52.

⁷ See NET Study Notes.

⁸ John is the only NT writer who refers to Jesus as "the Word." In the writings of John, he uses the term "word" (*logos*) 64 other times. In only five instances does he use the term to describe the person of Christ (John 1:1 [three times], 14; Rev 19:13). All other times, he uses it to describe a message. In this case, it's the message of eternal life. And the core of the message is this: By His death and resurrection for our sins, Christ alone promises us the free gift of eternal life, if only we will believe Him for it. See also Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 49.

⁹ The word "manifested" (*phaneroo*) is used a total of nine times (1 John 1:2 [twice]; 2:19, 28; 3:2, 5, 8; 4:9).

¹⁰ David R. Anderson, "Simul 1 John—Relationship or Fellowship," Unpublished notes.

¹¹ Gordon, *Living in the Light*, 19.

¹² It is usually true that in the introduction to a book we find the key to that book. In the first four verses of this Epistle we find the key.

¹³ The related noun *koinonoi* is used in Luke 5:10 of "business partners."

¹⁴ Gordon, *Living in the Light*, 30. The Greek word, *koinonia*, means "something is held in common." It means an association, a partnership, or a joint participation. It comes from another word, *koinos*, which means "common"; that is, something that is held in common by all. From this concept comes the concept of fellowship because fellowship is something we hold in common with others. That is the meaning of *koinonia*: fellowship. It is an association with other believers, a partnership with other believers, a joint participation with other believers and holding something in common with other believers.

¹⁵ Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981 [2001]), Electronic Ed; Michael Eaton, *1.2.3 John: Focus on the Bible* (Scotland: Christian Focus, 1996), 35-36; Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 34, 50; John G. Mitchell, *Fellowship* (Portland: Multnomah, 1974), 14.

¹⁶ Eaton, *1.2.3 John*, 35.

¹⁷ Eaton, *1.2.3 John*, 36.

¹⁸ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*. NICNT Reprint ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 107-108.

¹⁹ Brad McCoy, 1 John 1:1-4: Unpublished sermon notes from Tanglewood Bible Fellowship (3/10/96).

²⁰ See 1 Thess 1:6; Heb 12:2; Jas 1:2-3; and 1 Pet 1:6-8.