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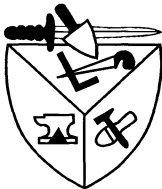
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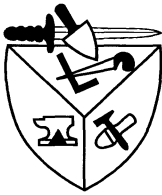
1,2,3 John

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Founders Press

Committed to historic Baptist principles
Cape Coral, Florida



Published by

Founders Press

Committed to historic Baptist principles

P.O. Box 150931 • Cape Coral, FL 33915

Phone (239) 772-1400 • Fax: (239) 772-1140

Electronic Mail: founders@founders.org or

<http://www.founders.org>

ISBN 978-0-9833590-9-8

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Printed in the United States of America

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Publisher's Introduction

The apostle John wrote his epistles near the end of his life, affectionately addressing his readers and desiring that they be grounded in the truth and certainty of the gospel. John proclaimed eternal life in Jesus (1 John 1:2) that we might have fellowship with one another and with God (1:3), that our joy may be complete (1:4) and that we might not sin (2:1). John concludes: "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life. (5:13)

This brief commentary on the 1,2,3 John by Dr. Curtis Vaughan is the sixth volume in our Study Guide Commentary series. It was originally published in 1970 by Zondervan Press. Founders Press is pleased to reissue this volume and add it our commentary series.

Dr. Curtis Vaughan (1925–2005) served as Distinguished Professor of New Testament at Southwestern in 1950. He helped train thousands of pastors, missionaries, and church leaders through his writings and classroom instruction. It is our hope, through the reproduction of this and other books in his Study Guide Commentary series, to see future generations benefit from his ministry and glean insight from his teaching.

Introduction

The five books of the New Testament which have been traditionally ascribed to John the apostle (the fourth gospel, three epistles, and Revelation) may “represent the highest reach of inspiration and revelation in our New Testament” (D. A. Hayes, p. 72). Yet the New Testament tells us surprisingly little about their author. He is mentioned by name only three times in Matthew, ten times in Mark, seven times in Luke, nine times in Acts, one time in Galatians, and five times in Revelation. In most of these references there is the mere mention of the name, and little or no information is given about the man.

We do not know when or where he was born, but we do know some things about his family. For instance, we know that he had a brother named James, that his father’s name was Zebedee, and that his mother’s name was Salome. (Some believe that the mother of John was a sister of Mary the mother of Jesus [cf. John 19:25; Mark 15:40]). In addition, we know that the family was engaged in the fishing industry. That the family was well-to-do is suggested by the fact that they had hired servants (Mark 1:20), that the mother in the family was one of the women who ministered to Jesus of their substance (Mark 15:41; Luke 8:3), and that John appears to have been known to the high priest and had access to the high priest’s court at the time of the arrest of Jesus (John 18:15-16). In addition, there is at least the suggestion that John had a home in Jerusalem (Matt. 20:20), which would be most unusual for a simple Galilean fisherman who for several years had not been actively engaged in his business. It is logical to conclude that he had some independent resources upon which to draw.

Tradition has it that John remained in Jerusalem until the death of Mary, the mother of Jesus, which is said to have occurred near the middle of the first century. Irenaeus informs us that John later took up residence in Ephesus. The early church believed that the fourth gospel and the three epistles were all written while he was living in that city.

Tradition is unanimous in its testimony that John outlived all the other apostles, dying in the city of Ephesus at an advanced age.

Jerome, for instance, says that the apostle lived sixty-eight years after the crucifixion. That would put his death somewhere around A.D. 100.

1 JOHN

Characteristics of the Letter

To understand I John one needs to be aware of certain pertinent facts about it. Some of these are as follows:

1. *It is a general letter.* Most of Paul's letters were written to particular churches or individuals. But such was not the case with I John. It doubtless was intended for the churches of the province of Asia, but apart from allusions to a particular heresy, there is a complete lack of local color. No personal details are given; not a single name (other than the name of our Lord) occurs in it; it has no salutation and no final greetings. Indeed, it reads more like a treatise than a letter. The only real clue to the destination of the letter is in the relationship implied between the author and his readers.

2. *It is a difficult letter.* Perhaps it is, as Alford says, the most difficult of all the New Testament epistles. The style, the structure, the thought — all of these contribute to its complexity. Admittedly, even the most unsophisticated reader can derive immeasurable benefit merely by a casual reading of the epistle. But even the greatest theologians and the most skilled exegetes are unable to grasp the message of John in its deepest meaning.

3. *It is a crisis letter,* having been written to stem the tide of a deadly doctrinal error which threatened to destroy the fellowship of the churches of Asia. This controversy is reflected in nearly every verse of the letter, but its distinctive features are most clearly delineated in 2:18-28 and 4:1-6. It is universally agreed that the error in question was some form of gnosticism, a quasi-philosophical movement which had its beginnings in the latter part of the first Christian century and came to full flower in the middle of the second century.

Gnosticism was essentially a combination of oriental mysticism and Greek philosophy. Eventually, it took on just enough of Christianity to make it a formidable foe to the faith. John considered it a counterfeit Christianity and viewed its growth "with unconcealed anxiety and open abhorrence" (Ramsay, p. 35).

The following are the principal tenets of gnosticism: (1) It

made knowledge, not faith, the one condition of salvation and the only test of fellowship with God. This knowledge, however, was not open to everyone but was the privilege only of those who had been initiated into the mysteries of the gnostic system. It was therefore an esoteric knowledge to which simple believers could not attain. This distorted emphasis on knowledge led to arrogance, lovelessness, and exclusivism. It also gave to the movement its name, the Greek word for knowledge being *gnosis*.

(2) It taught that all matter is inherently evil. This doctrine, in turn, led the gnostics into at least two other very grave errors, one practical and the other theological. The *practical* error concerned the nature of the Christian life. Starting with the assumption that the body is evil, some gnostics turned to asceticism and others to the opposite extreme of licentiousness. It appears that licentiousness was the tendency of those whom John opposes in this epistle. The body, they argued, is evil and doomed to sin, but the spirit is independent of the body, and therefore remains undefiled regardless of what one does. By this reasoning they set themselves above the obligations of morality and insisted that for them nothing was sin.

Theologically, the gnostic belief in the inherent evil of matter led to an outright denial of the real Incarnation of God in Christ. Their contention was that the divine Word could not be united with a human body, for the body, to them, was evil. They explained away the Incarnation in one of two ways. Some did so by denying the actual humanity of Jesus, holding that He only *seemed* to be human. The body of Jesus was an illusion, a phantom, only apparently real. Others explained away the Incarnation by denying the real deity of Jesus. This form of the heresy (sometimes called Cerinthianism because it was taught by Cerinthus, a contemporary of John) made a distinction between the man Jesus and the divine Christ. They held that Jesus was a mere man born through the usual generative process. Joseph was His father; Mary was His mother. He was distinguished above other men in character, but was still only a man. The heavenly Christ (called by the gnostics an *aeon*) came upon the man Jesus at His baptism but left Him before His death on the cross. The Christ, therefore, was not actually born and did not really suffer. It was the man Jesus who was born, and it was the man Jesus who died. He was not, in their thinking, the Son of God. The Son of God was the heavenly Christ who, for only a season, had been united with the man Jesus.

Every sentence of I John reflects the apostle's abhorrence of the gnostic system. He taught that it was wholly subversive of

Christianity and that no compromise whatsoever could be made with it.

4. *It is a companion letter to the gospel.* Biblical scholars differ in their understanding of the relationship of the epistle to the gospel, but all are agreed that the two works are linked together by style, vocabulary, characteristic phrases, and fundamental concepts. Brooke quotes Schulze to the effect that "in the whole of the first Epistle there is hardly a single thought that is not found in the Gospel" (p. ix).

It is open to debate whether the gospel or the epistle comes first, or whether they were written at one and the same time. Those who believe the epistle was written before the gospel support their position with the assertion that the epistle is shorter, simpler, and more primitive in its theological emphases. The epistle, in their thinking, is a sort of preliminary sketch of the theology of the gospel of John.

Most scholars hold that the epistle was written after the gospel. Brooke, for instance, sees the epistle as "a summary, not a first sketch" of the gospel (p. xxvi). "Many passages of the Epistle," he says, "seem to need the help of the Gospel in order to become intelligible" (pp. xxii-xxiii).

Still a third group of scholars holds (correctly, we believe) that the epistle was written about the same time as the gospel and sent along with the gospel as a companion writing. Blaiklock, a proponent of this view, says the epistle "was written to accompany and introduce the Gospel. That is why the two books should always be read side by side in mutual commentary. The letter dealt more directly with the spiritual problems of the hour, and attacked error in a manner which would have been out of place in the Gospel. The letter formed a sermon upon the Gospel" (p. 9).

5. *It is a late letter.* Indeed, it may well have been the last writing of the New Testament. But whether or not this is so, many things in the book point to a period toward the close of the first Christian century: the nature of the heresy combatted, the indications that the author was an aged man to whom all his readers were "little children," the suggestion that a second or third generation of believers had come to be, and so on.

Ramsay concludes that "the direct evidences supplied by the Epistle are very slight, and all that can be said with certainty is that the writing must be placed at a late date, but so far as the witness of the Epistle goes, it may well fall within the first century, not far from its close" (p. 41).

Plan of the Letter

Some of the ancient interpreters saw no order at all in I John and thought of the writer simply as a contemplative mystic who wrote down his meditations in the form of detached and isolated sayings. In the modern period scholars have correctly discerned connected order in the epistle, but there has been a tendency to be too exact and minute in tracing out the thought of the writer.

All outlines of I John are to a large extent artificial, but perhaps, as Plummer remarks, it is better to read the book "under the guidance of any scheme that will at all coincide with its contents, than with no guidance whatever" (p. liv). The main body of the epistle, which begins at 1:5, may be seen as containing three movements or cycles. The first, which represents the Christian life as *a divine fellowship*, shows that righteousness, love, and adherence to the truth are marks of those who are in the fellowship (1:5—2:28). The second movement introduces the thought of the Christian life as *a divine sonship*, and righteousness, love, and adherence to the truth are presented as evidences of this filial relationship to God (2:29—4:6). The third movement (4:7—5:20) is difficult to analyze, but it appears to be *a general discussion* of some of the leading ideas of the epistle. In it John mentions love, faith, righteousness, sonship, assurance, and so on. He looks at these things from various angles and shows how they are related to one another.

In the exposition to follow we have sought to isolate the larger units of thought and to develop and explain them without reference to an overall scheme. For a full analysis of the thought of the epistle the reader is referred to the works of Robert Law, B. F. Westcott, and Alfred Plummer. Law is particularly incisive and has had tremendous influence upon those who have written on I John since his book made its appearance.

What George G. Findlay says of John's treatment of divine love in a large sense holds true of the overall style of this epistle. That is to say, the apostle takes a theme and "holds it up as a jewel to the sun; each turn of expression, like another facet, flashes out some new ray of heavenly light" (p. 327).

THE TWO SHORTER EPISTLES

These two letters, which D. A. Hayes calls "specimens of the less important religious correspondence of the apostolic age" (p. 205), belonged to the *antilegomena* (disputed books) of the New Testament. That is to say, in the early period of Christian history

there was not complete agreement as to their canonicity. They were not included in the ancient Syriac New Testament and were rarely referred to by the early church fathers. These facts, however, do not necessarily reflect doubt concerning the apostolic origin of the letters. They are of such slight size and so personal in character that they were probably not widely known.

These two epistles are the shortest books in the New Testament. Each of them contains less than 250 words in Greek and could easily be written on a single sheet of papyrus (cf. II John 12). Findlay describes them as “notes snatched from the every-day correspondence of an apostle” (p. 4). Neither of them contains very much that cannot be found in I John. Indeed, II John has been described as a “cut-down” version of the first epistle.

Both letters are pastoral in tone and may in this regard be compared with the letters to Timothy, Titus, and Philemon. They deal with orthodoxy, church order, and Christian hospitality. Second John warns against extending hospitality to the enemies of the Gospel; III John commends Gaius for the practice of hospitality in reference to true “brethren.”

Their chief value for us is that they furnish insights into the historical setting of the first epistle.

Notes on 2 John

INTRODUCTION (verses 1-3)

Verse 1. *Elder* may be used either as an official title (cf. I Pet. 5:1) or in the sense of “old man.” Many modern interpreters understand *the elect lady* to be a reference to a church. More convincing arguments may be made for the view that the reference is to a Christian (“elect”) woman. The TCNT: “an eminent Christian lady.” Goodspeed: “the chosen lady.” Some think the word translated “lady” should be read as a proper name (“Kyria” or “Cyria”). *Whom*, which is masculine in Greek, includes both the elect lady and her children. *Truth*, which here means “sincerity” is one of the key words of this epistle (cf. verses 1, 2, 3, 4). *The truth* (last occurrence, verse 1) is the truth of the Gospel, the revelation of God in Christ.

Verse 3. *Be* is better translated “shall be” (ASV). The verse is not a prayer or a wish but a statement of confident assurance. *Love* is another key word of this epistle, being found twice as a noun and twice as a verb.

I. OCCASION OF THE LETTER (verse 4)

John had come across some of the elect lady's children in the course of his travels and had been favorably impressed by their conduct. *Of thy children*, that is, "some of your children" (TCNT).

II. EXHORTATIONS AND WARNINGS (verses 5-11)

1. *Exhortation to love and obedience* (5-6)

Verse 5. Compare I John 3:7.

Verse 6. "To live by his commandments, that is what love means" (Moffatt).

Verse 7. *Deceivers* are those who lead others astray, cause them to wander from the truth. The TCNT says, "impostors." The reference is to the gnostic teachers. On antichrist see I John 2:18 ff.

2. *Warnings against false doctrine* (verses 7-9)

Verse 8. The *things which we have wrought* refers to the labors of John and others in building these people up in the faith. Phillips: "don't throw away all the labor that has been spent on you."

The full reward is the reward of the faithful to be meted out in the last day. The TCNT, with less likelihood, interprets it in the sense of the full benefit of the labor spent on the readers: "reap the benefit of it in full."

Verse 9. *Whosoever transgresseth*. Better, "Whosoever goeth onward" (ASV). The words may mean "everyone who sets himself up as a leader" (cf. Berkeley). More probably, however, the reference is to "everyone who goes beyond the truth (the gospel)" (cf. TCNT). The errorists doubtless thought of themselves as "progressives," as "advanced" thinkers. On *he hath both the Father and the Son* see I John 2:22-23.

3. *Warning against helping heretical teachers* (verses 10-11)

Verse 10. *If there come any unto you*, that is, on a mission as a teacher. The reference is to the false teachers.

CONCLUSION (verses 12-13)

Verse 12. *Paper*: a sheet of papyrus. Perhaps John means that his letter must come to an end because he has used up his papyrus. *That our* ["your," ASV] *joy may be made full*: compare I John 1:4.

Verse 13. *Elect sister*: a Christian lady, sister to the lady mentioned in verse 1.

Notes on 3 John

I. SALUTATION (verse 1)

The elder. See on II John 1. *Gaius* was perhaps the most common of all names in the Roman Empire (Plummer). In the New Testament there was a Gaius of Macedonia (Acts 19:29), of Derbe (Acts 20:4), and of Corinth (Rom. 16:23). This is perhaps still another person bearing that name.

II. PRAYER AND COMMENDATION FOR GAIUS (verses 2-8)

Verse 2. *Above all things*: "in all things" (ASV) relating to Gaius' physical and temporal well being.

Soul: the immaterial part of being.

Verse 3. *The truth that is in thee*. Better, "thy truth" (ASV) or "the sincerity of your life" (Phillips). *Came* and *testified* mean "repeatedly came" and "repeatedly bore witness."

Verse 4. *In truth*. Better, "the truth" (RSV). Note recurrence of "truth" in the first three verses.

Verse 5. *Thou doest faithfully*. Literally, "a faithful work" (ASV). *To the brethren, and to strangers*. The NEB says, "for these our fellow Christians, strangers though they are to you." The thought is that Gaius showed hospitality toward the brethren even when those brethren were strangers.

Verse 6. *Before the church*, that is, the church at Ephesus (or wherever John was at the time of writing this letter). *After a godly sort*: The meaning is "in a manner worthy of the service of God" (TCNT) or in a manner which is in keeping with the fact that the work is God's work.

Verse 7. *The name* is the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 5:41).

Taking nothing denotes customary action. *Gentiles*: pagans, those who do not know God.

Verse 8: *We* is emphatic, "we Christians."

III. WARNING ABOUT DIOTREPHES (verses 9-11)

Verse 9 may contain a reference to II John. Many, however, think that the reference is to a lost letter. *Diotrephes* is mentioned nowhere else in the New Testament. He may have been the pastor of the church. *Who loveth to have the pre-eminence*: "who loves to have the foremost place" (Weymouth). *Receiveth us not* means "does not acknowledge our (John's) authority." Rotherham translates it, "doth not make us welcome."

Verse 10. A threat to call public attention to Diotrephes. *Prating*: literally, "boiling over." Plummer takes it to mean something like "talking nonsense." *Receive the brethren*: show hospitality to them.

Verse 11. Diotrephes' conduct is an example of that which must not be imitated.

IV. COMMENDATION OF DEMETRIUS (verse 12)

Demetrius, whom John commends to the hospitality of Gaius, may have been the bearer of this letter. His credentials are of the highest sort: he has "the witness of all men, and of the truth itself" (ASV), and of John. The only other occurrence of the name in the New Testament is of the silversmith who opposed Paul in Ephesus (Acts 19:24).

Two explanations are given of *the truth*: (1) revealed truth as the rule of life, (2) the Spirit of truth which is within the believer (Plummer).

CONCLUSION (verses 13-14)

Verse 13. *Pen*: a reed for writing.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read I John in a modern translation. Mark passages indicating John's purpose in writing his epistle.
2. Read articles on John in a Bible dictionary. *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* and *The New Bible Dictionary* (Eerdmans) are good one-volume works.
3. Using a concordance, look up every New Testament passage in which John is mentioned by name.
4. Read the article on I John in *The New International Bible Encyclopedia*. This is an especially helpful article.
5. Read the article on Gnosticism in *The New Bible Dictionary*.
6. For sermonic material on the epistles of John see Vol. 4 of Spurgeon's *Treasury of the New Testament* (Zondervan) and MacLaren's *Expositions of Holy Scripture* (Eerdmans). Spurgeon has nearly 150 large double-column pages of sermons on I John.

CHAPTER ONE

The Word of Life

(1 John 1:1-4)

- I. The Apostolic Proclamation (1:1-3)
 - 1. The substance of the proclamation (1-3a)
 - (1) His pre-existent glory
 - (2) His real humanity
 - (3) His manifested life
 - 2. The purpose of the proclamation (3)
- II. The Purpose of the Epistle (4)

First John has no epistolary introduction such as we find in most New Testament letters. This suggests that it is not as much a letter as an informal homily. Its tone is that of a pastor addressing his congregation.

The book opens with a prologue which, in some respects, is reminiscent of the first eighteen verses of the gospel of John. There are striking parallels in phrasing (e.g., "That which was from the beginning," "In the beginning was the Word") and in the use of characteristic words (e.g. "Word," "life," "witness"). Moreover, the two passages are concerned with the same central figure, namely, Jesus as the Word of God.

There is, however, a difference in emphasis. The prologue to the gospel emphasizes the eternal nature of the Word, His deity, and His agency in creation, as background for the assertion that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The epistle, on the other hand, acknowledges the deity of the Word but puts stress on His real humanity.

The prologue to the epistle is not as long nor as profound nor as majestic as the prologue to the gospel, but it is nonetheless a statement of great weight and power. Some see it as the pivotal statement on which the whole epistle is built.

This introductory paragraph may be divided into two parts. Verses 1-3 are a general description of the apostolic proclamation; verse 4 sets forth the purpose of this epistle.

I. THE APOSTOLIC PROCLAMATION (1:1-3)

In the Greek text, as well as in most of the English translations, the first three verses constitute one long, complicated sentence.¹ Sawtelle says, "The apostle has so much to crowd into his opening sentence that he seems scarcely to know how to begin" (p. 5). Every word is freighted with meaning.

If we are to follow the train of thought, it is essential that we understand the *structure* of the sentence. Three things are to be observed: First, the *main verb* ("declare") is found in verse 3. The object of this verb is expressed by four relative clauses which, for the sake of emphasis, are placed at the beginning of the sentence in verse 1. The essential statement therefore is as follows: "We declare to you that which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld and our hands handled concerning the Word of life."²

The declaration summarized in these verses is taken by many to be a sort of recapitulation of the gospel of John. This idea is particularly attractive if we assume, as many do, that I John was written as a covering letter for the gospel and dispatched simultaneously with it. Others prefer to think of the declaration mentioned here as more general; that is, as a summary of the total apostolic proclamation, oral and written.

Second, all of verse 2 is a *parenthesis*. It explains how the declaration set out in verse 1 is possible. Two matters are emphasized: (1) "the life" with which that declaration is concerned has been historically manifested. (2) John's own personal experience confirmed it: "We have seen it, and bear witness."

Third, the words placed at the beginning of verse 3 ("that which we have seen and heard") are *resumptive*. That is to say, they pick

¹George G. Findlay's analysis of these verses is different and quite suggestive. He takes the opening phrase ("that which was from the beginning") to be complete in itself and accordingly places a period at the end of the phrase. Another period is put at the end of verse 1 and the whole of the verse is read as a sort of title to the epistle. Moreover, by construing verse 1 in this fashion, Findlay is able to remove the parentheses from verse 2. He sees that verse not "as an eddy in the current" but rather as "the centre of the passage" (pp. 83-84).

²The phrase "concerning the word of life" (ASV) may be construed in any one of several ways: as a sort of resume of the four preceding clauses and standing in apposition with them — "all that concerns the word of life"; as a modifier of "have heard" (and loosely all the verbs following "have heard"); or as a modifier of "declare" (verse 3).

up anew and repeat in part the statement begun in verse 1. After the long parenthesis of verse 2, John felt that clarity of thought made it appropriate for him thus to repeat himself.

Having considered the structure of verses 1-3, it is now necessary to consider in greater detail what is taught in these verses about the apostolic proclamation. Two matters are presented: (1) the substance of the proclamation (verses 1-3a) and (2) the purpose of it (verse 3b).

1. *The substance of the proclamation* (verses 1-3a). The heart of the apostolic announcement is found in the expression *the Word of life* (verse 1). There are two lines of interpretation. First, there are those (e.g. Westcott, Findlay, Brooke, Dodd, Barclay) who interpret the expression as being impersonal. These take "Word" to mean something like "account" or "preaching" or "announcement" or as Westcott puts it, the "whole message from God to man." "Life" is construed as an objective genitive. Thus, in this interpretation, the "Word of life" is the revelation or announcement of life. "It is," in Findlay's words, "synonymous with 'the Gospel,' the message of the new life which those bear witness to and report who have first 'heard' it and proved its life-giving power" (p. 83). (Compare John 6:68; Phil. 2:16.)

The use of the neuter relative pronoun (translated "that which" in verse 1) gives some support to this view. Another matter which seems to lend strength to this interpretation is the fact that the stress of the phrase is on "life" rather than on "Word." Immediately after mentioning the "Word of life" John continues by saying, "For the *life* was manifested" (verse 2).

The other interpretation sees "the Word of life" as personal, that is, as a reference to the Son of God who is the revelation or expression of God to man. (Note the use of a capital letter in KJV and ASV, "the Word.") This is the interpretation of Calvin, Alford, Plummer, Law, Conner, Ross, and many others. Those who hold this view refer to John's use of "Word" as a name for Christ in the opening verses of his gospel and the similar use of the term in Revelation 19:13. On the whole it seems the better way of looking at the matter.

In this interpretation "life" may be taken as a descriptive (attributive) genitive ("the living Word," "the life-giving Word") or as an appositional genitive ("the Word who is the life").

What is proclaimed about the Word of life may be summarized as follows:

(1) *His pre-existent glory*. Some interpreters who explain

“Word of life” as a reference to the gospel take *that which was from the beginning* (verse 1a) as a statement designed simply to remove all thought of novelty in the apostolic announcement. It was, they aver, the writer’s way of saying that what he has to announce about the Word of life is no new discovery.

“The beginning” in this approach may be understood as a reference to creation, the beginning of history, or to the Incarnation, the beginning of the gospel age. There is, however, more to John’s words than this interpretation permits. “From the beginning” is to be understood as practically equivalent to “from eternity.” The wording, to be sure, is not identical with John 1:1, but the idea seems to be essentially the same in the two passages. In light of this, “that which was from the beginning” should be seen as a reference to something about the Word (Christ) which antedates time. Calvin takes it to be “the divinity of Christ” (p. 158). Alford explains the whole statement to mean Christ’s “eternal pre-existence and inherent Life and Glory with the Father” (p. 1694).

The neuter (“that which”) rather than the masculine (“him who”) is used because the declaration was not simply of the person of Christ but of all that relates to Him. Paul writes similarly in I Corinthians 15:10: “By the grace of God I am *what* I am.”

“Was” translates a Greek imperfect tense and suggests what always has been. Christ the Word did not come to be at some point in time; He already was when time began. He “was” before He “was manifested” (cf. John 1:1, 14).

(2) *His real humanity*: “That which we have heard . . . seen . . . beheld . . . handled, concerning the Word of life . . . declare we unto you” (verses 1b-3a, ASV). This statement serves a dual purpose. For one thing, by an impressive accumulation of words, it affirms and emphasizes the real humanity of Christ. This emphasis on His physical tangibility was doubtless directed against the reckless and unfounded claims of the Gnostics. These heretical teachers combined pagan philosophy and superstition with just enough Christianity to make their system especially dangerous. They denied a real Incarnation, some of them teaching that Jesus was merely a phantom, that He seemed to be a man but was not really a man. John, on the other hand, teaches that in Jesus the eternal God actually clothed Himself in human flesh and made Himself real to men through their senses. John and others heard Him speak, saw Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands. In John’s thinking God came all the way down to us. He took our nature; He became a man of flesh and blood.

Moreover, these words show that the first preachers of the Gospel were reliable and authoritative witnesses of the truth which they proclaimed. Indeed, this emphasis pervades the entire sentence which makes up the first three verses. Three times the writer asserts "we have seen"; twice he writes "we have heard"; and twice he declares that the life "was manifested." John's readers, who belonged to a later generation and had never seen Jesus, might have had questions about the apostolic message. The apostle takes great pains to assure them that he and his fellow apostles were competent witnesses and that what they proclaimed was trustworthy and true. He seems to struggle for words strong enough to express his feelings. "I tell you," he says, "we saw these things with our own eyes, we heard them with our own ears, we have touched and tested them at every point, and we know beyond any doubt that they are so."

Before leaving the first verse attention should be called to the significance of its verbs. "Was," as noted above, translates a Greek imperfect tense and may suggest what always has been. The verbs translated "we have heard" and "we have seen" are both perfect tenses. They point up the abiding reality of the audible and visible experiences of the apostle which may have occurred frequently. What was seen and heard during the days of Christ's earthly ministry left an abiding impression on him. "With our eyes" are words added to the verb "have seen" to emphasize that the experience was actual.

The verbs translated "we beheld" and "our hands handled" introduce a sudden change in tense. In the Greek both are in the aorist tense, possibly referring to a single act (in contrast with the oft-repeated acts of the two preceding verbs). Some interpreters think they refer to some special occasion when John and his fellow apostles had the experience described here. Specifically, the allusion may be to a time when they looked upon and handled the glorified body of the risen Christ (cf. Luke 24:39; John 20:27). Others doubt that the statement can legitimately be confined to a post-resurrection experience.

"We beheld" translates a word which speaks of an intent, contemplative gaze. Barclay says it means "to gaze at someone, or something, until a long look has grasped something of the meaning and significance of that person or thing" (p. 27). In earlier Greek usage it suggested looking with a sense of wonder, but by New Testament times the word had lost this significance. John uses it in the prologue to his gospel when he writes of Jesus, "We beheld his glory" (John 1:14). Jesus used it when addressing the multitudes about John the Baptist: "What went ye out into the wilderness to behold?"

(Luke 7:24, ASV). In the epistle John uses it in two other places, 4:12 and 14.

“Handled,” according to Findlay, “denoted not the bare *handling*, but the exploring use of the hands that *tests by handling*” (p. 85). It is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Luke 24:39 (“handle”); Acts 17:27 (“feel after”); and Hebrews 12:18 (“touched”). In Genesis 27:12 the Septuagint uses it of the fumbling of a blind man. In Deuteronomy 28:29; Job 5:14; and 12:25 it is used of groping in the dark. Ross comments: “Now that the Eternal Logos has been manifested, we no longer fumble in the dark, feeling after God; in Christ we have grasped hold of reality” (p. 135).

(3) *His manifested life.* Verse 2, a parenthesis, explains how it was possible for men to see, hear, and handle the eternal Word. It was because the Word (Christ) in His character as the life, became visible: *For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us* (verse 2). These words are spoken of “the life,” but the context suggests that the “life” and the “Word” are one. This is borne out by the similar statement in John 1:4: “In him [i.e., the Word] was life; and the life was the light of men.” (See also I John 5:20 [“. . . and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life”]; and John 14:6 [“I am . . . the life”]). “Life,” then, like “Word” in verse 1, is a name for Christ.³

The key word is “manifested,” used twice in this verse. A term of frequent occurrence in the New Testament, it is employed most often of God or Christ, or of men in relation to God and Christ. Westcott calls attention to its use in John’s writings of Christ’s first coming (I John 3:5, 8; John 1:31), of His revelation after the Resurrection (John 21:1, 14), and of His Second Coming (I John 2:28). Essentially it means “to bring to light,” “to make known that which already exists.” Thus the life which always existed in the divine Word was in Jesus made tangible and visible. The verse begins with an unqualified declaration of this fact. The last part of the verse repeats the idea with one addition: the Life was manifested “unto us.”

The thought expressed by “manifested” corresponds with “the

³Calvin, who explains “Word of life” to mean “life-giving Word,” prefers to interpret “life” here not as a personal name for Christ but as a reference to the life which is offered us in Christ.

Word was made flesh" (John 1:14). There is, however, this difference: "the Word was made flesh" focuses on the Incarnation as *a historic event*. "The life was manifested" suggests the *unfolding* of Christ's incarnate life. What we are saying is that the manifestation of the life was the consequence, the outworking, of the Incarnation. Lenski understands the phrase to include "the whole manifestation from the incarnation to the ascension" but thinks it has special reference to the period "from the baptism until the ascension, the time when the apostles beheld his glory" (p. 37).

Three things are said of the life manifested in Christ: (1) The life is "eternal life" (verse 2b; literally, "the life, the eternal," which is a stronger way of putting the idea). The adjective attributes to the life a quality that transcends time, that cannot be measured by time. (2) The life was "with the Father" (verse 2c). The Greek construction implies a personal, face-to-face relationship. (3) John was witness to the life (verse 2a). "Have seen" (which sums up the four verbs of verse 1), "bear witness," and "show" (better, "declare") all relate in some way to this thought. The three terms speak, respectively, of experience, testimony, and announcement.

2. *The purpose of the proclamation* (verse 3). The apostolic witness was given with compassionate concern for those who heard it. "That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, *that ye also may have fellowship with us*" (verse 3a). Those who are really in the divine fellowship cannot be satisfied while there are others still on the outside. As Spurgeon comments, "Having found the honey, we cannot eat it alone; having tasted that the Lord is gracious, it is one of the first instincts of the newborn nature to send us out crying, 'Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money: come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price'" (p. 478).

As explained above, these words resume the thought begun in verse 1 and which was interrupted by the parenthesis of the second verse. John repeats just enough of verse 1 ("that which we have seen and heard") to make the connection clear.

"Have fellowship" might have been expressed in Greek by a single word, but John uses here a verb and a noun. The expression therefore is an especially strong one, conveying the notion of the *enjoyment* of fellowship rather than the mere *fact* of fellowship. The verb, a present subjunctive literally meaning "continue to have," may contain a tacit allusion to the erroneous teaching which was threatening to destroy the fellowship of the Asian Christians. If we assume that the verb has this significance, John, in effect, says: "We

are making our announcement to you in order that the fellowship may be kept intact, that is, that you may *go on having* fellowship with us." The context, however, gives more probability to the view that the verb means "have and continue to have." That is to say, the proclamation is made in order that men might enter the Christian fellowship and then continuously enjoy it.

"Fellowship" is one of the great words of the New Testament, even though it does not appear with unusual frequency. Altogether it is used twenty times, four of these occurrences being in I John. It calls to mind a tremendously important truth, namely, that the Christian life is not a life lived in isolation. It is a life common to and shared by all believers. This is an emphasis sorely needed in our day, for the "church" idea is under attack as perhaps it never has been. And many professing believers who do not vocally attack the church are quite indifferent to any real fellowship in it. Barrett wrote some years ago (and his words are doubly true today): "The greatest revival needed today is a revival of the sense of the importance and value of Church life to the individual believer" (p. 31). We would do well to remind ourselves that it was the concept of true Christian fellowship, a thing utterly foreign to ancient pagan society, that helped Christianity spread like a prairie fire throughout the Roman world.

The root meaning of the word is participation, that is, a sharing in something with others. Mrs. Montgomery has the word "partnership." The NEB translates the whole phrase, "so that we together may share in a common life."

John defines the fellowship as a fellowship among Christians ("with us"), but he insists that it is far more than this. "Truly our fellowship is *with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ*" (verse 3b). There is a solemn fullness about this statement. Plummer renders the Greek thus: "Our fellowship is with the Father, and with the Son of Him, Jesus Christ." He then points out that "both the preposition and the definite article are repeated, marking emphatically the distinction and equality between the Son and the Father." The title given our Lord is also worthy of notice. "Son" points up His sharing in the essence and glory of deity and emphasizes His capacity to reveal God. "Jesus" calls attention to the reality of His human life; "Christ" refers to His divine commission.

II. THE PURPOSE OF THE EPISTLE (verse 4)

John states the purpose of his epistle in verse 4: "And these things write we unto you *that your joy may be made full.*" The RSV

says: "And we are writing this that our joy may be complete." This statement of purpose should be compared with 5:13, where John expresses the purpose of his letter in other terms. The two passages are complementary not contradictory. The words of the present passage are an echo of the words of Christ in John 15:11, "These things have I spoken unto you, that my joy might remain in you, and that your joy might be full."

Most commentaries take the "we" as a literary or editorial plural. Lenski, however, following Zahn, rejects this. He argues that John here, as in the first person plurals of verses 1-3, is speaking in the name of all the apostles. "These things," then, "includes the entire New Testament literature" (p. 380).

It is almost impossible to decide whether the true text read "your joy" (KJV) or "our joy" (RSV). Both yield a good sense. KJV refers to the joy of John's readers. The RSV suggests that John felt his own joy would be incomplete unless shared by his readers. The words of Samuel Rutherford reflect the same idea:

Oh! if one soul from Anwoth
Meet me at God's right hand,
My heaven will be two heavens
In Immanuel's land.

"Made full," translating a Greek perfect tense, suggests the idea of a joy made permanently full. "It is but the beginning of joy when we begin to believe. When faith daily increases, joy increases in proportion" (Luther).

The sequence of thought between fellowship (verse 3) and fullness of joy (verse 4) is significant. The import of it is that fullness of joy depends on the realization of true fellowship in Christ. "The isolated and solitary Christian can never be a happy Christian" (Barrett, p. 35).

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. Read I John in a translation you have not used before. Watch for recurring words such as "love," "know," etc.
2. Read articles on "Word" and "Fellowship" in *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary*.
3. Using a concordance, check John's use of the word "manifest."