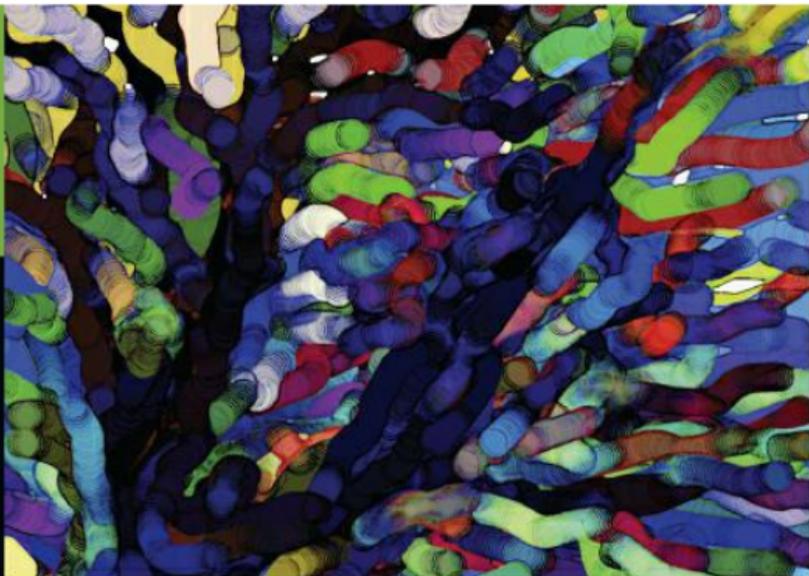


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DAVID JACKMAN

The Message of
John's Letters

THE NEW TESTAMENT SERIES EDITOR: JOHN R. W. STOTT

The Message of John's Letters

Living in the love of God

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General preface

THE BIBLE SPEAKS TODAY describes three series of expositions, based on the books of the Old and New Testaments, and on Bible themes that run through the whole of Scripture. Each series is characterized by a threefold ideal:

- to expound the biblical text with accuracy
- to relate it to contemporary life, and
- to be readable.

These books are, therefore, not ‘commentaries’, for the commentary seeks rather to elucidate the text than to apply it, and tends to be a work rather of reference than of literature. Nor, on the other hand, do they contain the kinds of ‘sermons’ that attempt to be contemporary and readable without taking Scripture seriously enough. The contributors to *The Bible Speaks Today* series are all united in their convictions that God still speaks through what he has spoken, and that nothing is more necessary for the life, health and growth of Christians than that they should hear what the Spirit is saying to them through his ancient—yet ever modern—Word.

ALEC MOTYER
JOHN STOTT
DEREK TIDBALL
Series editors

For Heather,
whose light and love, in Christ,
are my constant encouragement.

Author's preface

It was in the autumn of 1982 that I began the adventure of studying John's letters with the congregation of Above Bar Church, Southampton. On Sunday evenings, for over six months, we climbed the 'spiral staircase' of John's first letter and marvelled at his exposition of the things that matter most. There is a deceptive simplicity about John's style. So often the simplest vocabulary is combined with the most profound theology. Ideas that on the surface appear easy to grasp are shown on further investigation to possess ever-increasing depth, as themes interweave and new perspectives open out. After several years of living with John and trying to immerse myself in his message, I have sometimes felt defeated by the magnificence and complexity of it all. Yet, in other ways, I have constantly been encouraged to read the text again, to think it through again and to go on wrestling with the material. Isn't that one of the experiences that makes Bible study so exciting? 'He has ... set eternity in the hearts of men; yet they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end' (Ec. 3:11). John's letters are certainly in that category.

In trying to share John's message with others, I have been particularly encouraged by the congregations who attended the Keswick Convention Holiday Week in 1983, and in fellowship with the Tenth Presbyterian Church, Philadelphia, USA, with whose Sunday morning congregation I was privileged to share 1 John over the summer Sundays in 1986, when I enjoyed a pulpit exchange with their pastor, Dr James Montgomery Boice. These were wonderful weeks when as a family we experienced such a warm welcome and such a responsive hearing of God's Word. Truly for us it was a city of 'brotherly love'.

Over these five years I have been studying and trying to write. The final draft was completed during a period of sabbatical leave from Above Bar in the spring of 1986. I am most grateful to my secretary, Linda Burt, for her patient typing and retyping of the manuscript, to my colleagues on the staff team at Above Bar for their support, advice and encouragement, and also to the editorial staff of IVP for their gentle persistence and valuable editorial functions. It has been a privilege to contribute to the series and I would like to express my sincere thanks to John Stott for his original invitation (so long ago!), and for his patient understanding and generous encouragement to see the work through to completion. I have benefited also from other readers of the manuscript at different stages, who have made valuable suggestions for which I am most grateful.

It is one of the glories of the Bible that whenever you immerse yourself in a particular part, its contents seem to become the most important and urgent message in the world. I have no doubt that John's letters are a vital and powerful word from the Lord to the contemporary church situation around the world. In a day of polarization to extremes and consequent fragmentation of churches and individual lives, we need to heed his call to hold together truth and love on the basis of God's self-revelation throughout the Scriptures and especially in this text. It is my prayer that this exposition will help its readers to understand and apply unchanging truth, with genuine Christian love, to the multitude of perplexities, challenges and opportunities we face, as God's people, in our generation. We dare not be sidetracked by substitutes. 'Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.'

DAVID JACKMAN

Chief abbreviations

- AV The Authorized (King James') Version of the Bible, 1611.
- Bruce *The Epistles of John*, by F. F. Bruce (Pickering and Inglis, London, 1970).
- Candlish *A Commentary on I John*, by R. S. Candlish (1886), in *The Geneva Series of Commentaries* (Banner of Truth, 1973).
- Clark *First John— a Commentary*, by Gordon H. Clark (Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, Phillipsburg, New Jersey, n.d.).
- JBP *The New Testament in Modern English*, by J. B. Phillips (Collins, 1958).
- Lenski *The Interpretation of 1 and 2 Epistles of Peter, the Three Epistles of John and the Epistle of Jude*, by R. C. H. Lenski (Augsburg, Mineapolis, 1966).
- Marshall *The Epistles of John*, by I. Howard Marshall, in the *New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1978).
- NEB The New English Bible (NT 1961, 2nd edition 1970; OT 1970).
- NIV The New International Version of the Bible (1973, 1978, 1984).
- Plummer *The Epistles of St John*, by A. Plummer, in *The Cambridge Greek Testament for Schools and Colleges* (Cambridge University Press, 1894).
- RSV The Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NT 1946, 2nd edition 1971; OT 1952).
- RV The Revised Version of the Bible (NT 1881; OT 1885).
- Westcott *The Epistles of St John— The Greek text with notes*, by B. F. Westcott (Macmillan, London, 1883; republished with Introduction by F. F. Bruce, Eerdmans, 1966).

Introduction

Jerome tells us that when the aged apostle John became so weak that he could no longer preach, he used to be carried into the congregation at Ephesus and content himself with a word of exhortation. ‘Little children,’ he would always say, ‘love one another.’ And when his hearers grew tired of this message and asked him why he so frequently repeated it, he responded, ‘Because it is the Lord’s command, and if this is all you do, it is enough.’^[1] To any student of the letters of John, this story rings with authenticity. The NEB entitles the first letter ‘Recall to Fundamentals’, and that takes us both to the heart of the writer’s concern and to his penetrating relevance to our contemporary situation. But before we can appreciate its message fully, or feel the force of its searching analysis in our own lives, we need to know a little about why these letters came to be written and who their author was.

1. The historical setting

It is very probable that the author of these letters was also the author of the Fourth Gospel and that he was the apostle John. There are so many parallels of thought and expression in these documents that few scholars have been prepared to follow the suggestion that more than one author was involved.^[2] What we have before us in 1 John is a circular letter, though unaddressed, unsigned and without any of a letter’s usual characteristics of style. It was probably sent from Ephesus to the congregations of Asia Minor which were under John’s special care, towards the end of the first century.

We know that after Christ’s ascension John remained for some time at Jerusalem, as one of the ‘pillars’ of the church (Gal. 2:9). While Peter and James took the lead, Luke’s careful account in Acts does not exclude references to John’s involvement in the early days (*e.g.* Acts 3–4). He certainly seems to have been present at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:22). Perhaps John remained in the city until the conflict of the years immediately preceding the destruction of the temple, the city and the Jewish nation, by Titus in AD 70. Many believers, including the apostles, fled the city in those days just before the siege, in obedience to the command Christ had given (Mk. 13:14) and it seems likely that John made Ephesus his new base. Irenaeus, a disciple of John’s disciple Polycarp, tells us that the apostle continued in the church at Ephesus until the times of Trajan (AD 98–117).^[3] Clearly the apostle lived to a great age. He would therefore have experienced exceptional authority as the only remaining apostolic link with the earthly ministry of the Lord Jesus, and these letters may well be the last of the canonical Scriptures to be written, probably during the decade AD 85–95.

2. The moral climate

Why did John come to live in Ephesus? And how does his having done so affect the letters themselves? The destruction of Jerusalem follows quickly on the heels of the first fierce blasts of persecution under the Roman emperor Nero in the mid 60s, when Peter and perhaps Paul were martyred. As Christians fled from Jerusalem and from Rome, Ephesus—the greatest of all the Asian trade cities—became the natural centre for the growing churches. The church had been founded by Paul in about AD 55, and had probably been pastored by Timothy (1 Tim. 1:3). Doubtless it had grown in the intervening years, and its geographical location and importance made it a natural focus for the churches of Asia Minor. In the letters to the seven churches in Revelation, Ephesus is addressed first (Rev. 2:1–7).

That letter to Ephesus shows something of the pressures under which the church existed in a pagan city, given over to idolatry and superstition. The huge religious industry, centred on the vast, magnificent temple of Artemis (Diana), was a source of enormous material wealth—and of spiritual bankruptcy, characterized as it was by gross immorality and the bizarre rites of eastern pantheism.^[4] Clearly connected to this was the city’s addiction to magic and sorcery, on which many of the founder members of the church had decisively turned their backs (Acts 19:19). It is not surprising, when we consider this background, that John’s letters insist on right moral behaviour as the touchstone of a true Christian faith. Christians cannot continue to live in darkness (1 Jn. 1:6), to love the world (2:15), to believe every spirit (4:1) or to have anything to do with idols (5:21). Love for the God who is light means a radical break with every kind of evil.

But it was out of this moral morass that the issues of false teaching and theology arose, which are the major concern of these letters and which we must now consider briefly.

3. The theological issues

Many of the New Testament letters were written primarily to correct false teaching and its resulting distorted behaviour, to combat heresy and immorality. In this the Johannine letters are no exception. What distinguishes them is their comparatively late date, which means that the opponents John is dealing with were more sophisticated and subtle in their presentation of error than some of their predecessors. Their system was still developing and it needed strong counteraction.

The first letter is directed to a specific situation in the churches, where false prophets have separated themselves and their followers from the main body of believers (2:19) and so divided the church. Their reasons for this action seem to have centred on their claim to a special ‘anointing’ (*chrisma*) of the Holy Spirit, by which they had been given true knowledge of God (2:20, 27). This knowledge (*gnōsis*) became the centre of their distinctive beliefs and lifestyle. Eventually these tendencies developed into a widespread and varied movement to which scholars have given the generic

title 'gnosticism'. John's concern, as we shall see, is to emphasize and define what is a true knowledge of God. 'We know' is one of his favourite, recurring assertions (see 2:3, 5; 3:14, 16, 19, 24; 4:13; 5:2; *etc.*)

One of the gnostic teachers active in Ephesus at this time was a man called Cerinthus. A Jew, from Egypt, he sought to combine Old Testament ideas with gnostic philosophy, rejecting all of Paul's letters and accepting only parts of Matthew and Mark from the New Testament writings. This higher 'knowledge' did away with the characteristic Christian revelation, centred on the person of Jesus, under the guise of reinterpreting the message from a more advanced intellectual standpoint. It was actually a philosophy of life which had no foundation in the investigation of historical facts, such as the birth and resurrection of Christ. Rather it was imaginative, speculative, insisting that what may be thought is the ultimate test of reality. 'We may describe it as a series of imaginative speculations respecting the origin of the universe and its relation to the Supreme Being.'⁵ Among the many strands of gnostic belief, we can note two major ones which are vital to our understanding of John's context. The first is the exaltation of the mind, and therefore of this speculative knowledge, over faith and behaviour. The second is the conviction that matter is essentially evil because the physical world is the product of an evil power.

How did this work out in the thinking of those infected by these gnostic teachings? First, they denied the incarnation of Christ (2:22; 4:2–3). It was a logical deduction from their belief that matter was evil. How could the supreme deity descend to be united with an impure physical body, as a man? To get round the obvious historicity of Christ, men like Cerinthus seem to have propounded the theory known as docetism (from *dokein*, to seem). According to this teaching the divine Word, the heavenly Christ, did not truly become man. He only *seemed* to have a human form, and there were those who maintained that Christ's body throughout his earthly life was a phantom. Others were prepared to admit the reality of the body of Jesus, but separated Jesus from the Christ. The earthly Jesus was born and suffered, but the Christ did not unite himself with Jesus until the baptism, and withdrew again before the passion and the cross. So not only was the person of Christ as truly human and truly divine under attack, but also the reality of his suffering and therefore its efficacy, not to mention the resurrection of the body. According to the gnostics, redemption involves being set free from the pitiful state of being imprisoned in a body.

John is in no doubt about the nature of such teaching and teachers. Three times he describes them as 'liars' (2:4, 22; 4:20). He urges his readers to apply to every teaching they hear the test of the fundamental truths of the tradition they have already received, which has as its foundation the real incarnation of Christ. His true humanity is underlined by John's conviction that Jesus Christ the Son of God 'came by water and blood' (5:5–6) and that the blood of Jesus, the eternal Son, 'purifies us from every sin' (1:7). To the gnostics to describe the eternal Son as having flesh and blood was unthinkable; to John it was the heart of our salvation. His body given for us, his blood shed for us were the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world (2:2; 3:16) and the supreme demonstration and guarantee of the love of God for mankind (4:10).

False teaching always leads to false living, and the ethical implications of gnosticism are equally John's concern throughout the letters. Here the claim of the false teachers was to have attained moral perfection through their superior enlightenment. They no longer sinned. Unlike some exponents of the gnostic creed, this does not seem to have led these teachers back into gross pagan immorality, but rather into an arrogant superiority which despised ordinary Christians, who remained ignorant, in the darkness. Such an attitude led them to separate themselves from the churches, as a new moral and spiritual élite. John's concern is to examine the nature of true light and darkness, and to link real spirituality with love for all other Christians in an unbreakable chain (4:20–21). His own affection for his readers is amply illustrated by his frequent reference to them as 'little children' (*teknia*) in 2:12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4 and 5:21 and as 'beloved' (*agapētoi*) in 2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11. As Lenski comments, 'This is the voice of a father.'⁶

These letters therefore are dealing with matters of the utmost crucial importance for the churches. Gnostic teaching struck at the root of all Christian teaching, in both Old and New Testaments. They denied that God was the creator of the material universe, denying that it was 'very good' (Gn. 1:31), and claiming that it was essentially evil and inferior. This led them to deny the reality of Christ's incarnation, atoning death and bodily resurrection, and with that to redefine sin and redirect Christian behaviour. It is not surprising that John recognized in such a frontal attack 'the spirit of the antichrist ... already in the world' (4:3). For John this was not a local skirmish with one or two heretical individuals. The foundation principles of faith and conduct were being eroded and the young churches were thrown into confusion. 'When the foundations are being destroyed, what can the righteous do?' (Ps. 11:3).

John has no doubt as to the answer. Doubtless aware of the special personal relationship he had had with the real, historical Jesus in his incarnation, John proceeds to state and reaffirm the great central truths of God's revelation in Christ, to give assurance that those who believe in the incarnate Son really do have eternal life. Just as his gospel was written so that we might believe (Jn. 20:31), so John's first letter is written that believers may know that they have eternal life (5:13). The signs of reality and therefore the marks of assurance are not mystical and philosophical but down-to-earth and observable. To profess knowledge of God without a holy life, without a clean break with sin and a deep love for other Christians, is as much a delusion as to deny the incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ. Belief and behaviour are inseparable. Mind and heart belong together. True light leads to real love.

Nearly 2,000 years on, the need for John's teaching to be heard, received and applied is as great as ever it was. As our century draws to its close all sorts of ingenious distortions of historic, orthodox biblical Christianity abound. Leading academics and church dignitaries are unwilling to affirm without hesitation the incarnation of Christ, or his sacrificial atoning death, or his bodily resurrection. Biblical morality is under attack within the church, as well as outside it, in such matters as sexual behaviour or the sanctity of human life. Scriptural marker posts which have guided generations are systematically removed in the name of a new hermeneutic or modern scholarship. We need to be recalled to the things that matter most, in our generation, as much as John's readers did.

We may laugh at the fantastic speculation of the gnostics regarding the origins of the universe and their unscientific dualism, but is not the heresy of the supremacy of knowledge as alive as ever it was? Do we not need to learn from John that it is man's sinful rebellion against God, not his ignorance, that is our chief problem? Is it not still true 'that light without love is moral darkness'?⁷ We are not lacking contemporary teachers who, while claiming to build on an apostolic foundation, want to take Christians on to 'deeper' truths beyond Scripture and to a fuller life. Adding to God's Word in Scripture has probably caused more heresy and division in the church than denying certain truths or subtracting from the Bible. 'The gospel and ...' is at the root of many errors. John will help us to resist the fashion that sees the revelation of God in Scripture as dated and inadequate. This is the view which expresses itself in the formula, 'Go to the Bible for what God said yesterday, but to the prophet for what he is saying today.' The implied opposition between the two is in itself alarming. What Scripture said, it still says. And what Scripture says, God says. We need to take seriously what John teaches about those who claim to have received new revelation from God which can give a new vitality to a Christian's life and experience that the apostolic teaching never provided.

As we have seen, the errors of John's day were really an accommodation of Christian faith to the prevailing ideas of the secular culture. In every generation the church is challenged by the world, either to confront or to absorb its culture, to 'be squeezed into its mould', or to 'let God re-mould your minds from within'.⁸ Today we are in danger of reflecting the existentialist philosophy of our society and not challenging it. That is why we Christians so often base our judgment and conduct on our personal feelings and experiences rather than on God's revealed truth. It is why we are conditioned by subjectivism rather than by the great objective realities of God and his Word. John does not attempt a detailed analysis or critique of error; he has no need to do so. He proclaims the truth in the characteristic apostolic confidence that where the truth is declared and believed, error will be undermined and will ultimately collapse.

4. The literary structure

Before we turn to the text we need to recognize the problems of analysing John's writing in a systematic way. Unlike Paul, John seldom argues a case, so it is difficult to trace a linear, logical progression of thought. The links between ideas are not always clear and the transition is usually very gradual. Lenski describes the first letter as 'built like an inverted pyramid or cone'.⁹ The base being laid in 1:1-4 and the whole letter being an 'upward broadening' of these themes. For myself, I have found the image of a spiral staircase the most helpful. As you climb the central staircase in a large palace or stately home, you see the same objects or paintings from a different angle, often with a new appreciation of their beauty. It is rather like that with the great truths John is concerned to state and revisit in the letter. The view gets more wonderful as you climb and the heavenly light shines more and more clearly until you reach the top. Or perhaps one should think of a presentation of colour transparencies in which one magnificent photograph after another fills the screen, each dissolving into the one that follows it. How can you analyse such a presentation?

I have therefore decided to present the material section by section, recognizing, as all the commentators do, that the first letter takes as its foci the two great statements concerning the divine nature that God is light (1:5) and God is love (4:8, 16). In a general way these two affirmations correspond to John's concern about right believing and right behaviour, uniting for us, for all time, doctrine and experience, mind and heart, Word and Spirit, truth and love. If some formal grouping of the sections is required it may be that the following pattern will be helpful to others as it has been to me:

Walking in God's light (1:1-2:14),
Practising God's truth (2:15-3:10 and 4:1-6),
Living in God's love (3:11-24 and 4:7-21),
Sharing God's victory (5:1-21).

The second and third letters are of course easier to deal with, in that they are shorter and more specifically focused. Nevertheless the themes of truth and love are strongly interwoven throughout them both, and we shall find much in them to underline and reinforce the lessons taught in the major letter.

1. The prologue (1 John 1:1–4)

1. Foundation facts (verses 1–2)

The opening of the letter, without any formal preliminaries, is as startling as it is difficult. In the original, the object is placed first and expanded by a number of clauses, until we eventually reach the main verb ‘we proclaim’ in verse 3. Because this is so difficult to understand, most modern English versions, like the NIV, anticipate the verb by inserting it in verse 1. Many divide up the long opening into more manageable units, as does the NEB with its arresting wording:

It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell. Our theme is the word of life.

Clearly to John the theme is more important than the telling; that is why he places it first for emphasis. But what is this *Word of life* which was there *from the beginning*? The phrase echoes the start of the Gospel of John (‘In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God’) and beyond that the very first verse of the Bible in Genesis (‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’). Go back as far as you will in your imagination, says Genesis, before anything that exists came into being, and you will find God, the eternal Being. Go back to that same point, says John in his gospel, and you will find Jesus Christ with God, because he was God, before anything was created. But the thought here is not quite the same, for it is not creation but the incarnation that is the focus of John’s interest. And his concern in the letter is to declare that the Word which was made flesh in the womb of the virgin Mary was the same eternal Son of the Father who was before all time and who was the agent of all creation. The Word of life did not merely come into existence at Bethlehem; he already existed from the very beginning *with the Father* (verse 2). This phrase (Greek, *pros ton patera*) indicates the closest sort of face-to-face fellowship, existing in the eternal mystery of the Godhead. It was this everlasting Word that became the human Jesus. There can be no separation between the two. It is true both that there never was a time when the Word was not and also that there was a definite moment of time when that Word of life *appeared* (verse 2a), when it was manifested and experienced by human beings in this material world of time and space.

But this interpretation raises a difficulty. We have said that the ‘Word of life’ is to be equated with the earthly Jesus. But John begins the letter with four neuter pronouns (*ho*)—*that which ... which ... which ... which*. These cannot stand in opposition to the masculine noun translated ‘Word’ (*logos*). If the *logos* is really Christ himself it would seem strange to refer to him as ‘that which’ rather than ‘he who’. Does John therefore mean something other than the historical masculine person of Jesus when he uses the term *logos*? It can have a wider meaning, of course; it can refer to the Christian message, or gospel, the revelation of God in holy Scripture. Thus, when Paul exhorts Timothy to ‘preach the Word’ (2 Tim. 4:2) he clearly means the whole counsel of God, not just the person of Christ. Some Christians talk about ‘getting into the Word’ when they are describing their study of the Bible. Some have suggested that ‘the message (*logos*) of the gospel’ (see Acts 15:7) is what John is proclaiming rather than the historical person of the incarnate Son.

Certainly the grammar leads us in that direction, but the verbs in verse 1 also demand our careful consideration. Undoubtedly a message can be *heard* and even *seen*, but *looked at* and *touched* are stranger verbs to use of an impersonal Word. The word for *looked at* expresses the calm, intent, continuous contemplation of an object which remains before the spectator.^[1] But *touched with our hands* together with *seen with our eyes* emphasizes the personal encounter and objective experience of a true revelation. Could John ever forget the invitation of the risen Lord to his bewildered, frightened disciples, who were convinced they were seeing a ghost? ‘Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have’ (Lk. 24:39). Both ‘touch’ and ‘see’ can be used in a non-physical sense to mean mental contemplation or intellectual testing, but neither is the natural meaning in this context.

Perhaps the key to the problem lies in the precise meaning of the phrase the *Word of life*—which is also a wonderful truth. Clearly John’s emphasis here is on *life*. This is what he develops in verse 2, and indeed *the Word* is not mentioned again after this in the letter. It seems best then to understand the genitive *of life* as being in apposition to *the Word*, which would give the meaning ‘the Word which is the life’. And what is that word or message if it is not Christ himself? This theme runs throughout John’s writings. Jesus himself asserted, ‘I am the life’ (Jn. 11:25; 14:6) and taught that the Father has granted the Son to have life in himself (Jn. 5:26). ‘In him was life, and that life was the light of men’ (Jn. 1:4). The life is the divine nature itself, in all its powerful, external personhood and dynamic activity. ‘Paul could say, “We preach Christ” (1 Cor. 1:23; cf. 2 Cor. 4:5) showing that the message and the person are ultimately identical.... Our writer here wants to emphasize that the Christian message is identical with Jesus; it took personal form in a person who could be heard, seen and even touched.’^[2]

How does this relate to the difficulty of the neuter pronouns? The neuter conveys more than the masculine alone would do. The historical Jesus is the Christ of faith. The gospel in which we believe and by which we are saved is the eternal Son of the Father who ‘for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven; by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and was made man.’^[3] Christ *is* the gospel. The person and the message must be held together.

When we consider all this against the background of the church situation explored in the introduction, we can begin to see how every clause of this complex introduction has its own edge and significance. Verse 2 makes this especially clear.

The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it ... Here is the authentic apostolic witness to the reality of Christ's identity as the eternal Son, seen in his earthly life, guaranteed by their personal experience.

This is why we can have confidence in their testimony. Although we have not seen, the apostles did. The evidence in the person of Jesus convinced them of the reality of the gospel and thrust them out to proclaim it. The eternal life John refers to was *with the Father*, so he is not talking about the new birth which is the experience of all who trust in Christ, but the life of the Eternal which always was. It is this divine life which has been manifested in human history, in a real man, who really lived, really died and really rose again from the grave; in Jesus of Nazareth. John and his fellow apostles heard him speak. They saw him with their own eyes; not as a mystical vision, but in living reality. It was more than a momentary glimpse, rather, it was a consistent daily revelation. They touched him physically both before his death and after his resurrection. This was no spirit being, disguised in a temporary human suit of clothes. Neither was he a mere man on whom 'the Christ' descended for a period of time. He who was from the beginning and whom John heard and saw and physically touched was the Word who is the life.

Jesus, the man, was also nothing less than God. Cerinthus and his followers might theorize from their imaginative, philosophical base; but they were not witnesses. They had not seen or heard or touched. Only by dismissing the true witnesses were they able to maintain their destructive heresies. Only by making John into a liar could they deny that this earth is indeed 'the visited planet.'⁴

2. Everyday experience (verses 3–4)

As we study John's letters, we shall see over and over again how he relates doctrinal truth to daily life, by weaving the two strands together into one cord of Christian orthodoxy. He is not alone among the New Testament authors in insisting on the marriage of learning and living. It is of course an implicit criticism of the false teachers, who exalted 'knowledge' to the highest place, and a rebuke to much contemporary evangelicalism which divorces a correct theology from a Christlike life. It is sadly all too possible to know the truth without doing it, to profess the faith without expressing it in a consistent life. Some of the strongest rebukes and warnings of the New Testament are reserved for such double-mindedness, which is at root hypocrisy. James warns us against self-deception (Jas. 1:22–25), and Jesus identifies such an attitude as evil-doing (Mt. 7:23).

Having come at last to the main verb *we proclaim* in verse 3, John's concern in the remaining part of this prologue is to point out the practical application of the apostolic testimony to the lives of his readers. The order is vitally important to grasp. The message proclaimed is the person and work of Christ, the incarnate Son of God. He is both the source and the substance of the eternal life which John wants his readers to know they have. That life is now defined in terms of a fellowship, or relationship, with the Father and the Son. This is itself in keeping with the words of Jesus recorded by John in his gospel as part of the Lord's high-priestly prayer: 'This is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent' (Jn. 17:3). Believing God's truth brings us into a living union with God—fellowship with the Father and the Son. That is the fellowship the apostles knew and enjoyed, but it is something which every believer can share with them. Our blessings are none the less real because they rest on faith rather than sight. As Jesus told Thomas: 'Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed' (Jn. 20:29). Faith is the door to fellowship.

The word *fellowship* (*koinōnia*) is an interesting one. Used in classical Greek as a favourite expression for the marriage relationship, the most intimate bond between human beings, it is particularly appropriate to describe the Christian's personal relationship with God and with his fellow believers as here, and later in verses 6 and 7. But the word also meant a participation or sharing in a more general sense, for instance a business partnership or a joint tenancy. Perhaps John could look back on the distant days when he and his brother James had been shareholders in the Zebedee Fishing Company. Their relationship to their father and so to each other, within the family, gave them a common concern. This will prove to be one of the letter's great thrusts. There is no other way into genuine membership of the body of Christ, into true fellowship with God, than by believing the apostolic testimony. You cannot know God without knowing Christ. You cannot know fellowship without receiving the truth.

All true spiritual unity is therefore grounded in the gospel. That is the treasure which all believers have in common, in these 'jars of clay' (2 Cor. 4:7). Because we have Christ and he has brought us to the Father, we all belong to the one family. We all have the same privilege as the apostles to address him in the most intimate personal terms, to use the family's name, 'Abba'—dear Father. And because we belong to him, we belong to one another. 'We are family; we are one.' Without that fellowship with the Father there can be no lasting earthly unity. That is why all attempts to cobble together a man-made unity between groups of professing Christians on any foundation other than God's revealed truth in Scripture, the Word of life that is the gospel, are bound to fail. Fundamental gospel unity already exists between those whose fellowship is with the Father and the Son. We do well to pray and work for its increasing manifestation and activity in a time of such confusion and perplexity as this.

In our desire for visible unity among Christians, however, we must not forget that it is fellowship with God that comes first; fellowship with one another is derived from it. Tradition cannot provide a basis on its own for a true church unity, nor can a common experience, which is a notoriously subjective standard. The truth of the Scriptures is the only adequate foundation for fellowship. The basis of all lasting *koinōnia* must be the theological realities of what God has done in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, which John is about to reaffirm in this letter.

Before he does so, let us note that other practical stimulus to maintaining a living fellowship with God—a *joy* that is constantly increasing (verse 4). There is some discussion as to whether the text should read 'our joy' or 'your joy' (the Greek manuscripts differ), though the former is more likely and seems to be best supported. But both are true, since we

may surely enjoy the latter in our own experience. Later John will write, 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth' (3 Jn. 4). But what greater joy could there be for his children too? The conscious possession of eternal life, the daily enrichment of personal fellowship with the living God, the deepening awareness of oneness with all God's people everywhere—could there be any comparable recipe for fullness of joy? Such joy is quite different from human happiness. As a spiritual song of a bygone generation put it, 'Happiness happens; but joy abides.'⁵ Three times in the upper room, in the face of the cross, Jesus spoke of the joy that awaited his disciples (Jn. 16:20, 22, 24), joy that would be complete and indestructible. But it came to them only through the cross and because he gave himself resolutely to fulfil his Father's purposes (see Heb. 12:2–3).

Let us never forget that the realities to which John testified, and in which our faith is grounded, include the death of our Saviour on the cross, which opens up our pathway to joy. To the extent that we are convinced of the total sufficiency and efficacy of that sacrificial death, we shall know a deep joy which no-one can drain, a full joy which nothing can quench. And we shall share something of John's heart as we realize that nothing is more enriching or more wonderful than helping others to that same conviction too, and seeing their fellowship deepen.

2. Walking in God's light (1 John 1:5–7)

'If God made man in his own image,' it is said, 'then man has returned the compliment.' That is the root of most of our problems. All sin is in essence an attack upon the character of God. We are not willing to believe that the living God really is as the Scriptures reveal him to us. We have a vested interest in resisting the claims of the 'transcendental interferer', as C. S. Lewis once called God. So we reject God's revelation and construct a substitute more in accordance with our likes and needs. This is the heart of human rebellion; we will not let God be God in our own lives. We would rather have our idols. We are like the character in one of G. B. Shaw's plays, whom the playwright describes as 'a self-made man who worships his creator'. You see the symptoms every time someone says, 'But I like to think of God as ...'. Usually what follows is a picture of a benevolent, avuncular figure, whose main purpose is to satisfy the whims of his creatures; or some other distortion of the God revealed to us in the Scriptures.

But if our view of God is distorted, everything else is bound to be out of joint. Perhaps it is for this reason that John begins the letter proper by launching us into one of the greatest theological statements of the whole Bible, *God is light* (verse 5). There is much that he needs to correct in both the doctrine and morals of the churches to which he was writing, but he begins not with their eccentricities, but with God. Not for nothing did the Greek church call John 'the theologian'. While the whole Scripture record from Genesis to Revelation shows us God's attributes, revealed in his words and his actions, John alone seeks to expound the essence of the nature of God, in the form of propositions which use the simplest language to convey the most profound concepts. It is John who records for us the teaching of Jesus to the Samaritan woman in the gospel that 'God is spirit' (Jn. 4:24). And in this first letter he adds that God is light and God is love (4:8). Light and love are his very essence, just as 'spirit' is. They describe not his characteristics, but his very being.

It is important to note how carefully John introduces this first key statement, which will dominate the first half of this letter. The revelation that *God is light* is not a discovery which John has made as a result of his philosophical explorations, but a message he has received. It was heard *from him*, a clear reference to Jesus Christ, last mentioned at the end of verse 3. As always, the apostolic task was to announce to others what they had heard from the Lord. The church's task similarly is to keep this 'pattern of sound teaching', to 'guard the good deposit that was entrusted to you' (2 Tim. 1:13–14), and to do this by entrusting it to 'reliable men who will also be qualified to teach others' (2 Tim. 2:2). So there is an unbroken chain of witnesses to the truth of God as revealed in Christ and to the apostles from the beginning down to the present day. We are no more at liberty to redefine or 'modernize' the message than they were. God's revealed truth is not negotiable. So John stresses the divine source of what he is about to declare. The authority for his teaching lies in what he has heard in the historical revelation of God, in Jesus Christ.

John's authority to write and our authority to believe rest on the crucial importance of this disclosure of the hidden eternal life of God, in time and space, in Jesus of Nazareth. What more authority could anyone want, or need? Against this, his opponents could offer only their own speculative fantasies.

1. The content of the message (verse 5)

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. The positive is characteristically reinforced by an equally strong negative which might be translated absolutely literally 'and darkness, in him, no, not any at all!' The two are utterly incompatible. What does light suggest to us? Minds taught by Scripture go back to Genesis 1:3: 'And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.' Here is the earliest expression of the nature and will of the Creator. His words execute his purposes; both words and actions together reveal his character. The God who creates begins with light, as the primary expression of his own eternal being. And from this everything else grows. Without that light there would be no plant or animal life; no growth, no activity, no beauty would be possible. All creation owes not only its existence, but its sustenance, to the God who is light, and the Christ who declared himself to be the light of the world (Jn. 8:12; Col. 1:16–17). Not surprisingly, light became a frequent symbol of God's presence in the Old Testament, finding one of its clearest expressions in the exodus, when Israel experienced that 'the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night' (Ex. 13:21). This function, as a source of illumination and guidance, probably lies behind John's emphasis here on walking in the light as an essential of Christian discipleship.

The other major significance of God as light in Scripture is as a picture of his perfect moral righteousness, his flawless holiness. John's thought here is paralleled by Paul's assertion in 1 Timothy 6:16 that God 'lives in unapproachable light'. His 'otherness' is demonstrated by the prophet Habakkuk's conviction, 'Your eyes are too pure to look on evil; you cannot tolerate wrong' (Hab. 1:13). A foundation stone of right Christian believing and living, then, is that intellectually, morally and spiritually *God is light*, unsullied and undiluted. It speaks of holiness and purity, of truth and integrity; but also of illumination and guidance, warmth and comfort. As Faber has so beautifully expressed it:

My God, how wonderful thou art,
Thy majesty how bright,
How beautiful thy mercy-seat,
In depths of burning light!

How wonderful, how beautiful

The sight of thee must be,
Thine endless wisdom, boundless power,
And aweful purity!¹

Such light scatters all our darkness. It is the truth against which all other claims must be tested. For it is the nature of light to penetrate everywhere unless it is deliberately shut out. The light reveals the reality, and while it dispels darkness, it also exposes what the darkness would hide. The point is well made in one of C. S. Lewis's insights when he comments that we believe the sun has risen not because we see it, but because by it we see everything else. There are no twilight zones in God. If we interpret this verse theologically, John is saying, 'God is truth and error can have no place with him'; if ethically, he is saying, 'God is good and evil can have no place beside him.'²

We are now in a position to see the personal implications of claiming to be in relationship with such a God. Clearly there can be no higher human privilege than to have *fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ*. That is why John is writing the letter and that is why we are given life, for 'the chief end of man is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever.'³ But it makes a nonsense of this possibility to imagine that we can live some sort of compromise existence, with one foot as it were walking in the light with God, and the other remaining in the darkness of the world. One of the first lessons of messing about in boats is that it is impossible to exist for long with one foot in the boat and the other on the river bank. The spiritual 'splits' are equally impossible! To illustrate this, John now proceeds to examine and demolish three false claims which were current in his day and which are still prevalent in our own. The first of these will occupy our attention for the rest of this section.

2. The claim that sin does not matter (verse 6–7)

Each of the wrong attitudes, or false claims, with which John now deals is prefaced by the same introductory phrase, *If we claim ...* (see verses 6, 8 and 10). Using the touchstone of reality that God is light, we are now provided with three marks of the reality of the claim to be in fellowship with this God, or three tests which can be applied to prove whether or not such a claim is genuine.

In verse 6, the mark of unreality is to say that we have fellowship with God, while actually living a life marked by unrighteousness. The idea of 'walking' indicates a persistent movement in a particular direction, what we might call a 'lifestyle'. The proof of verbal claims to be orthodox in our beliefs and truly to know God is a holy life, and for that there can be no substitute. A person who persists in sin cannot be in touch with God. The two states are mutually exclusive. You might just as well live in a coal pit and claim that you are developing a sun tan! Put that way, we may well ask how anyone could ever make such a claim. What did John really have in mind?

There are two things to note. The positive correction which follows in verse 7 emphasizes *fellowship with one another* (between Christians) as evidence of walking in the light. This implies that the darkness John is especially concerned about in verse 6 is the attitude that imagines, 'I can have fellowship with God without fellowship with my fellow believers.' This particularly applied to the false teachers who were dividing their followers from other Christians by claiming a superior knowledge and experience. John's point is that their attitude to others negates their claim to be walking in the light. The second point leads from this, which is that those who walk in the darkness, but claim to be in the light, are actually redefining sin. The false teachers did not regard their unwillingness to value and love other Christians as sin. They minimized and excused it; indeed they positively justified it, as the grounds of their extra 'insights'. Nevertheless, as John is to teach several times in the course of this letter (2:9, 11; 3:11–14; 4:20–21), no-one can truly love God without loving his children (5:1).

Moreover, to redefine sin and to fail to be convicted of it as sin in our lives is a certain indication that we are not walking in the light. A true Christian will find the searchlight of God's truth constantly exposing the parts of his life that need to be confessed as sin and left behind, through the life-changing power of the Holy Spirit. Walking in the light means living each day with God who *is* light. The nearer I come to God, the more conscious I shall be of my own sin and rebellion. So the greatest saints have always been conscious of themselves as the worst of sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). Christians who live in God's light do not find it difficult to walk together in fellowship. The light shows the way ahead, and enables them to co-ordinate their actions and move forward in harmony. Where Christians are at variance, or separate from one another, it is always true that someone is already walking out of fellowship with Christ. This does not mean that we shall all agree about everything, but that is not the essence of fellowship anyway. It is about loving one another and valuing one another, so that we can agree to differ without severing the ties that bind us to one another as sons and daughters of the light.

One further thought at the end of verse 7 is that as the light of God reveals our sin, we shall keep appropriating the cleansing that comes through Christ's death, by our own repentance and faith. Notice that the present tense, *purifies*, denotes continuous action. 'Keeps on purifying' would be an equally good translation. Frequently we Christians are deprived of the enjoyment of walking in the light because we feel we have failed so often, perhaps in a recurring or besetting sin, that we dare not come back to God to ask for fresh forgiveness. We cannot say, as it were, 'Lord, it's me again and it's that again.' This is to fall for the devil's lie. There is a glorious inclusiveness about this present tense and its application to *all sin*. We can never come too often to God when we come in humble repentance and active faith. It is because this blood (verse 7) is that of God's Son that it has such virtue. Its purifying properties extend to each and every sin. To walk in the light means to become increasingly conscious of sin that would hinder our fellowship with God and our fellow Christians, and as that sin is revealed, not to run away into the darkness again. Rather we bring it, by faith, to the God whose Son gave his life that all our sins might be forgiven and removed. As we do so, the barriers to fellowship are removed and we continue in that relationship with God.

Sin does matter. We dare not redefine it, or pretend it doesn't exist. If it demanded the price of the blood of God's only Son on the cross then it is of paramount importance that we take it seriously, accepting God's definition of where and what we are by nature and receiving his abundant pardon and restoring love, by grace. This is the outcome:

Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God (Jn. 3:19–21).