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1 John 1:1–4



THAT WHICH WAS from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. ²The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. ³We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. ⁴We write this to make our joy complete.

Original Meaning

JOHN'S OPENING WORDS serve as an introduction and present us, as C. H. Dodd once wrote, with a "grammatical tangle," which has been well disguised by the NIV. Phrases pile up on one another as John attempts to compress into a single paragraph ideas whose complexity will be worked out in the letter. Any careful reader of the Johannine literature will immediately note echoes of the Fourth Gospel's prologue. In each prologue (the Gospel and 1 John) the *logos* or Word of God is central, and yet the two paragraphs do not run parallel to each other. Instead they are complementary.¹ In the Gospel we learn about the history and work of the Word in creation, his incarnation into the world, his rejection, and the eternal life he offered. Now John takes up two themes: the reality of this incarnation ("[that] which we have heard . . . seen . . . and . . . touched") and its salvific importance ("this we proclaim concerning the Word of life"). John seems to emphasize the centrality of the *incarnate* Word as if controversy swirled around the subject, as if some were disputing whether or not the Word of God had actually become flesh (complete human

1. This, incidentally, suggests that the Gospel in its completed form was written prior to 1 John and that the present verses are a reflection on the earlier Johannine prologue.

flesh) in Jesus Christ. As we shall see, right thinking about Jesus Christ is the fulcrum on which right theology is balanced.

While this hunch about theological controversy will be borne out in later verses (cf. 4:2–3), we can see in 1:3–4 that John’s emphasis is entirely pastoral and practical. His mind is on the fabric of Christian community and how its fellowship and joy are being affected by dispositions concerning Jesus. He assumes that intimate fellowship in the Christian community is only possible when there is consensus about the identity and presence of Jesus.

The Incarnate Word (1:1a)

THE STRAINED GRAMMAR of verses 1–3 underscores John’s emphasis on the centrality of the incarnate Word. A literal rendering makes the sense clear:

¹What was from the beginning;
what we have heard;
what we have seen with our eyes;
what we beheld and our hands touched
—concerning the word of life—
 (²and the life appeared
 and we have seen and testify, and announce to you the
 eternal life which was with the Father and was revealed to
 us);
³What we have seen and heard
We **proclaim** also to you.

Placing the main verb of the sentence in verse 3 permits John to stack four relative clauses at the beginning (a fifth is in 3a) and thereby emphasize the object of proclamation (the Word) rather than the act of proclaiming itself. It is also peculiar that the relative pronoun is neuter (“what,” Gk. *ho*, rather than “who”). Since “Word” (Gk. *logos*) is masculine, it would seem appropriate and grammatically correct to place the relative pronoun in agreement with its intended subject, Jesus, the incarnate Word.² However, using a neuter pronoun can be

2. The text would then read, “The one who was in the beginning, whom we have heard and seen with our own eyes. . . .”

a way to express “the whole career of Jesus.”³ Neuter pronouns can function “comprehensively to cover the person, words and works.”⁴ Therefore, John is saying that the whole sweep of Jesus’ life bears importance to his subject, not simply particular events or even the abstract appearance of God in history. In Christ, God walked with humankind, and anyone who had contact with that reality, anyone who had heard, seen, and touched that reality, could never make it less than pivotal.

All this is to say that John’s singular interest is not some abstract doctrine about Jesus or the importance of preaching about Jesus (though some commentators take it this way); rather, it is the reality of Jesus’ personhood—his incarnation or his entry into history. He is described as “the Word,” not as if Jesus is an idea preached or message that enlightens. This term rather harks back to the Gospel’s prologue, where Jesus is called “the Word” as a personal title of importance to both Greek and Jewish ears. The Word is the creative self-expression of God by which the cosmos was made (Judaism, Gen. 1:1ff.). It is the divine reason that gives the universe coherence and purpose (Hellenism; cf. Philo). Thus in verse 1 John writes that this word was “from the beginning” (cf. John 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God”). This does not refer necessarily to the beginning of Jesus’ life on earth (though some have argued for this). It instead sets out the marvelous tension of Christian thought: He who existed from limitless eternity has entered time and space and taken up residence here on earth.

Thus, of critical importance is the relationship of this Word to human history. John’s present verses serve as a reflection, an expansion perhaps, on the Gospel prologue’s primary verse, John 1:14: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory.” To dispel any suggestion that this appearing in history was imagined or partial, John speaks graphically of the sensory confirmation (hearing/seeing/touching) that accompanied this revelation.

3. Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 154.

4. *Ibid.* Brown cites examples in John 3:6; 6:39; 17:2, 7, 24; and 1 John 5:4. Typically see John 6:37, “All that the Father gives to me will come to me. . . .”

The Word of Life (1:1b–2)

HOWEVER, THIS IS not simply any Word. Nor is this a Word “about life,” as if it were a message that explained the meaning of living. The final phrase of verse 1 is pivotal because it explains the importance of this revelation. Once again the Fourth Gospel’s prologue in John 1:4 gives us our clue. There we learn that this incarnate Word is the source of life: “In him was life.”⁵ “Concerning the Word of life” is almost an awkward parenthesis inserted into the paragraph to make absolutely certain that the eternal life described here is grounded in the historical events of Jesus’ life. In other words, eternal life is not the by-product of some enlightenment or knowledge acquired mystically. Eternal life is historically anchored in what we may call *the scandal of particularity* unique to Christianity. The life of God has been channeled to us through a historical event, an event that John says has been verified by people who saw it.

It is interesting that in verse 2 the authority behind John’s affirmation is not merely some tradition or doctrinal convention. It springs from experience. It would be one thing for John to defend the particularity of the Incarnation as a logical requirement of some theological system. And no doubt he could do this. The repeated emphasis on personal experience—seeing and testifying what was revealed to us—is not just a way to shore up his defense of the Incarnation. John’s authority rests in what he knows to be true *because he has touched it*. He is making a compelling appeal; he is offering a testimony, not just to coherent, orthodox theology, but to a living Word, Jesus Christ, whose reality is the principal reference point of his life. In the earliest Christian community when the apostolic replacement for the deceased Judas Iscariot was sought, the chief criterion for nomination was possessing this experience of the incarnate Lord. Matthias was a candidate because he had *seen and heard and touched* Jesus Christ, “beginning from John’s baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us” (Acts 1:22).

The Word and Fellowship (1:3–4)

EMBRACING THIS WORD, experiencing this life, gaining this reference point—these are all prerequisites for Christian community. The pur-

5. See also John 11:25 and 14:6, where Jesus says that he is life. The NIV supports this interpretation by printing “Word” with a capital W in verse 1.

pose of John's letter is fellowship, "so that you also may have fellowship with us" (v. 3a). The Greek word translated "fellowship" in the NIV is *koinonia*, which means to have something in common. *Koinonia* may describe a shared labor (such as the fishing of James, John, and Simon, Luke 5:10) or the common enjoyment of some gift or experience (such as the grace of God, Phil. 1:7; the blessings of the gospel, 1 Cor. 9:23; or the Holy Spirit, 2 Cor. 13:14).

This is the crux of John's thought and the purpose of his writing. Christian community is not some passing association of people who share common sympathies for a cause. Nor is it an academy where an intellectual consensus about God is discovered. It cannot be so superficial. Christian community is partnership in experience; it is the common living of people who have a shared experience of Jesus Christ. They talk about this experience, they urge each other to grow more deeply in it, and they discover that through it, they begin to build a life together unlike any shared life in the world.

But Christian community is not merely horizontal; it is not just a social phenomenon. John asserts that this fellowship is also "with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (v. 3b). This puts one more dimension to the meaning of community. Fellowship is not just the coincidence of a shared experience of God, where we compare our private spiritual walks; it is living and experiencing the Father and the Son *together* as believers. Christian fellowship is triangular: my life in fellowship with Christ, your life in fellowship with Christ, and my life in fellowship with yours. The mystical union I enjoy with Christ becomes the substance that binds the church together. In verse 4 John adds that the net result of such a community will be joy—"to make our⁶ joy complete." This is a benefit, a by-product, of a genuinely Christ-centered fellowship.

The themes seen here find a close parallel in Jesus' teaching in John 15. Abiding in Christ, the vine, is the way to becoming Jesus' disciple (15:8) and experiencing his joy (15:11). Moreover, our union with the vine is the prerequisite for loving one another (15:12–17). Christian community once again grows from a matured relationship with God

6. Some ancient texts read "your joy" instead of "our joy." Evidence for this alternate reading is considerable (hence its appearance in the NIV footnote), and the similarity of the two words in Greek (*bumon*, *bemon*) makes a scribal confusion understandable. The alternate reading may have been influenced by the appearance of "your joy" in John 15:11 and 16:24.

in his Son, Jesus Christ. And no doubt where this relationship with Christ is absent, such community is an impossibility.

*Bridging
Contexts*

FROM MY OVERALL study of the Johannine literature (see the introduction) and from what I discern here in these verses, John's emphasis tells me that he is writing to a community where there is considerable disunity. Factions have broken out and severe theological disagreements have undercut the church's vitality. From 1:1–4 and 4:1–3 it is clear that the Incarnation is under siege. We speculated in the introduction that these opponents may well have been early Gnostics who, if they affirmed the divinity of Jesus at all, could hardly agree that he was genuinely physical in any manner. To them, physical properties could not share anything with a divine realm. Therefore, in this diverse community Christians were trying to discern what was *essential for Christian identity*. It is not a far-fetched speculation to imagine debaters insisting that any "doctrine that divides" be set aside so that none will be offended.

In addition, John has on his mind the quality and character of Christian fellowship that should accompany Christian life. John's repeated emphasis on love throughout his letter suggests the harsh tone of the debates. Christians were at each other's throats, trying to figure out how to live in an environment where there was such diversity. Therefore, even here in 1:1–4 his urgency springs from a desire to restore fellowship and joy in an otherwise divided community.

Curiously, however, his approach is not simply ethical. John does not merely catalogue what behaviors are unbecoming to Christians and then list appropriate virtues, such as Paul does in Galatians 5:16–26 and Colossians 3:5–17. John unites the themes of Christology and community as he exhorts the church that a right understanding of Jesus should inform how we live together. Jesus' incarnation is the central doctrine of Christian faith. Embracing this historical Jesus and continuing to bear witness to him (seeing/touching/hearing) should be at the center of our lives together. Jesus Christ as God-in-flesh cannot be marginalized.

As an interpreter I understand that this precise context, complete with proto-Gnostic heretics, is barely a part of my world. Some trends,

especially among those who seek to forge a new unity among all religious movements, may come close in how they dispense with the centrality of Christ as a first order of business. Some New Age religions likewise try to inherit the “center” of Jesus’ teaching, leaving his personhood behind.

On the other hand, I must look for themes that bridge John’s context and mine. I must seek to distill what is *contextually transferable* to bring this passage to life. Two themes come to mind. (1) John is wrestling with *the essence of Christian identity*. What is the essential core of belief that distinguishes the Christian? What is the watershed doctrine at the heart of our faith? We will return to this again and again as we see that incarnational theology is for John the crux issue of thought. (2) John is describing *the basis of Christian fellowship*. Within the church the quality of our life together is an essential datum in fulfilling our mandate as God’s people. However, should we pursue this harmony and unity of purpose at all costs?



WE LIVE IN a culture that is eager for religious experience. George Barna reports that in the United States over 90 percent of the population believes in a God or gods that have power over the universe.⁷ As a result, religious tolerance and experimentation are commonplace. Furthermore, when asked if all of the world’s religions essentially prayed to the same God, 64 percent of the adult public agreed. In the Christian church, among those who called themselves evangelicals, 46 percent agreed, and among those who labeled themselves “born again,” 48 percent agreed. Among adults who simply called themselves “regular church attendees,” fully 62 percent said that they believed all religions essentially prayed to the same God.⁸ This is astonishing. Within the pews of America’s churches, two-thirds of the people do not believe in the *exclusive* character of the Christian message, and almost half of all evangelicals say the same.

In light of these tendencies both inside and outside of the church, how will we define our life together as Christians? What will be the

7. G. Barna, *What Americans Believe: An Annual Survey of Values and Religious Views in the United States* (Ventura, Calif.: Regal, 1991), 174.

8. *Ibid.*, 212.

essential character of Christian thought and community? John's first words to his churches force us to ask penetrating questions about our own Christian identity.

(1) *What does it mean to hold to "the scandal of the Incarnation"?* John sets before us the particularity of Christian thought. At the center of our faith is the entrance of Jesus Christ into history as a *definitive revelation* of God. This is an event that cannot be jettisoned. It cannot be redefined as a myth or compared with the religious revelations offered by others (Mohammed, Joseph Smith, New Age prophets, etc.). Jesus Christ is definitive.

Throughout the world Christians are often tempted to forge new alliances in order to achieve noble ends. This is particularly true in countries where multiple faiths coexist side by side. For instance, I have been privileged to become acquainted with the Palestinian Christian community and to learn of its fight for survival in Israel. In the hills of the West Bank, moderate Palestinian Muslims and Palestinian Christians ask what sort of unity they might build in order to construct a unified front for justice.⁹

The same questions are with us here in the Western world. The difficulty becomes acute when we find ourselves in interfaith dialogues that try to build unity particularly for commendable social programs. I recall attending one such attempt in Skokie, Illinois. This was a meeting of Jewish rabbis and Christian pastors who, for the sake of Chicago's northern suburbs, agreed that a united front was needed against crime and drugs. As the discussion progressed, all sides pressed for a "common theological denominator" that would be the basis of prayer, worship, and ethics. It goes without saying that Christological emphases had to be set aside.

I have also spent a number of years in the United States Navy as a chaplain. The military chaplaincy succeeds miraculously to protect the distinctives of each faith tradition so that each worshipping community need not compromise what is essential to its beliefs. And yet the exercise of public, interfaith religion puts unique demands on the chaplain. I recall leading a prayer at an officers' school near the Navy War College in Newport, Rhode Island. I was reminded gently by the

9. See further, G. Burge, *Who Are God's People in the Middle East? What Christians Are Not Being Told About Israel and the Palestinians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).