

The Word of Life
(1 John 1:1–4)

As we have seen, the author of 1 John nowhere identified himself in this document. He did, however, include himself among those who were eyewitnesses of Jesus. That the eyewitness who wrote 1 John was the apostle of Christ is affirmed by the ancient manuscripts of the treatise. The handwritten copies of 1 John that have survived from the early centuries have John's name in their titles. Also, the ancient translations of the Greek documents into other languages have the name of John in their titles. It is clear then, that from the earliest times, Christians believed this document was written by John, the son of Zebedee.

A relative pronoun in Greek or English ("who," "whom," "that") introduces an adjectival clause. In the sentence "The man who wears a badge is a policeman," "who" is a relative pronoun and "who wears a badge" is an adjectival clause. It tells the reader what kind of man is being discussed. Instead of "the good man," for example, we are essentially saying, "the one-who-wears-a-badge" man. John opened his

treatise with a series of adjectival clauses. He did not supply the leading verb, “proclaim,” until 1:3. The One he had described in all these ways, John said, was the One who was proclaimed to them. This One had been perceived by human senses. Jesus was not some ephemeral phantom. He was a flesh-and-blood person.

John assured his readers that the testimony they had received about Jesus Christ came from eyewitnesses. The author included himself among those who had actually been on hand to see, hear, and touch Jesus. The reason John stressed this point was that voices had arisen among Christians who supposed the person of Jesus to be something different than what the eyewitnesses had proclaimed. The gospel message, John implied, would be lackluster and powerless if its chief subject, Jesus Christ, had been an immaterial phantom. He was writing so that his believing readers might be reassured about the fleshly presence of Jesus. The joy inherent in the Christian proclamation depended on His being human. When they were convinced of His humanity, their joy would be complete.

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete (1 John 1:1-4).

It is surprising that John would use a neuter pronoun with reference to Jesus. Instead of the neuter ὃ (*ho*, “that which”), we expect the masculine ὃς (*hos*, “he who”). The neuter pronoun in “what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands” (1:1) would be understandable if he was making reference to the message proclaimed by John and his fellow witnesses. However, John said that he was writing concerning what he had seen and beheld and handled. The neuter pronoun can refer only to “the Word of Life” (1:1); it can only refer to Jesus. If John intended any significance for the neuter, it was probably because he wanted to place Jesus on a higher-than-human plain.

Though Jesus was deity, John affirmed that He had appeared in the flesh. The use of the neuter may hint at Jesus’ deity, but John wanted to do more than hint that Jesus was God made manifest. Readers today may find it curious that John used neuter pronouns when Jesus was the subject, but they ought to be careful about drawing exegetical conclusions based on that fact. Closer examination demonstrates that his use of the neuter is hardly unique to John’s first letter. In passages such as John 6:37, 39, neuter pronouns are used when the reference is clearly to persons. In Colossians 3:14, the neuter relative pronoun has the feminine *agapē* (“love”) as the antecedent. In 1 Corinthians 3:5, Paul used a neuter pronoun to refer to himself and Apollos. Such flexibility means that exegetical conclusions based on the use of neuter relative pronouns in 1 John 1:1 are uncertain at best.

John faced a situation where false teachers who did not accept the full humanity of Jesus had found

a hearing in churches. Other teachers were abroad who had overcompensated by insisting that He was completely human. John affirmed that Jesus was both fully human and fully deity. He wrote with the authority of an eyewitness. The word "witness" is an important one throughout the letter. John was witness both to Jesus, a man whom he saw and heard, and to God made manifest. Concerning the human Jesus, the apostle used the verb *ψηλαφάω* (*psēlaphaō*, "touch"). It was a tactile word that occurs only three other times in the New Testament (Luke 24:39; Acts 17:27; Hebrews 12:18). John and his companions had not only seen and heard Jesus, they had touched Him. Their hands had handled Him.

The first four verses of 1 John are a tangle of grammar and syntax. The verbs chosen by the author affirmed the humanity of Jesus, but the opening phrase, "What was from the beginning," speaks to His eternity. The REB translates 1:1, "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 hands: our theme is the Word which gives life." The opening words of John make a general statement about Jesus, but the apostle may have had more in mind. Apostolic preaching not only affirmed that Jesus was God in the flesh, but it also affirmed further that the fleshly Jesus had risen from the dead. The verb "touch" is the same one Jesus used in Luke when He invited His disciples to touch Him after His resurrection from the dead (Luke 24:39). Behind John's affirmations are the denials of the antichrists.

The phrase *ὁ λόγος τῆς ζωῆς* (*ho logos tēs zōēs*, "the Word of life") is connected in the closest way to what John had seen and handled. "The Word" in

1 John 1:1 reminds us of Jesus as He was presented in John 1:1. The person of Jesus and the resulting Word proclaimed about Him are inseparable. John's burden was to demonstrate to his Christian readers that the message they had heard from apostles like himself had been the complete message of God. The message they had heard from the beginning had resulted in their being reborn. The truth that affirmed they were Christians was the truth they had received from the apostles. By contrast, false teachers who had lately influenced them were teaching and living lies.

John included others with himself who bore witness to Jesus. Using an aside, the author turned to the proclamation of what he and others had witnessed. "Eternal life" was the blessing John's readers had realized because "the life was manifested" (1:2). John further said, "We have seen and testify and proclaim to you" (1:2). The eternal One, the life who is the Creator of all things, had taken human form so that God could be manifest in Him. Not only had John and his fellow witnesses seen and heard the One who was from the beginning, but they had also spoken about Him; they had testified to "the eternal life." Jesus of Nazareth was "the eternal life." It was He who had been "with the Father" (1:2) from the beginning. Less than one hundred years before John wrote his first letter, Jesus Christ had been revealed to witnesses. He had risen from the dead, and witnesses had proclaimed Him to be the Son of God. John R. W. Stott paraphrased the passage in part:

In our proclamation concerning the message of life in Christ we concentrate on the historical manifestation of the Eternal. We do this partly because we are uniquely qualified to be witnesses to the incarnation. Our own

eyes have seen, and our own hands have handled Him.
We have heard and beheld Him for ourselves.¹

Whom did John include with himself when he used the pronoun “we”? No doubt it included the apostles,² but John seems to have included others as well. The apostles were fellow witnesses with him, but John likely included all of the faithful teachers who had proclaimed Christ to the churches he addressed. The “we” was not so much the apostles themselves, whom the first readers of John’s treatise had heard, as it was the apostolic message that had been proclaimed. The message the apostles proclaimed witnessed to Jesus’ being both deity and manifested in the flesh. The high Christology previously encountered in the Gospel of John is evident in the letter. Coming from the presence of the Father, the life came to be manifested among us.

After the phrase “concerning the Word of Life” at the end of 1:1, John stepped aside in order to explain what he meant by “the Word of Life.” The explanation was of great importance in light of the anti-Christian message that had caused some to turn their backs on fellowship with the church (2:19). Historical events were the starting place. In the beginning, the

¹John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 69.

²The word ἀπόστολος (*apostolos*, “apostle”) is found in John’s Gospel and the letters only in John 13:16 where it refers generically to one who is sent. However, “the twelve,” apparently referring to the same people called apostles in the first three Gospels, occurs three times in John 6 (6:67, 70, 71) and once in John 20:24. “The twelve” also appears in Acts 6:2 and 1 Corinthians 15:5. John referred to “apostles” in Revelation 2:2; 18:20; 21:14. In the last instance, they are called “the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

Word had been manifested in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The Word in the person of Jesus and the preached Word had merged in the testimony that John and others had proclaimed. The Word was “the eternal life” which had been with the Father but had now been made known to the Christians who would read John’s letter.

John and his fellow teachers had proclaimed the fullness of the message God had revealed to them. They had held back nothing; John’s readers had lacked nothing. “What we have seen and heard,” John wrote, “we proclaim to you also” (1:3; see John 20:30, 31). Through the proclaimed message, teachers such as John shared a common “fellowship” with those who had believed. Fellowship among those who believed, in turn, was based in the common fellowship that all of them had with God.

The Greek word rendered “fellowship” (κοινωνία, *koinōnia*) appears four times in the first chapter of 1 John (1:3 [twice], 6, 7), but nowhere else in John’s writings. The word suggests an “association, communion, fellowship, close relationship.”³ Authors contemporary with John used it especially of husbands and wives. Marriage was understood to be the most intimate of all human relationships.⁴ In the New Testament, the word sometimes refers to the common redemption, hope, faith, and love that believers share with one another (1 Corinthians 1:9; 10:16; 2 Corinthians 13:14). At other times, the word reverts to its primary concern with the sharing of

³Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3d ed., rev. and ed. Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

⁴Ibid.

property or of responsibility. Paul used *koinōnia* for the collection of money he gathered for the poor in Jerusalem (2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13).

John used the concept of *koinōnia* to explain that human sharing is meaningful only insofar as people relate to one another by a common faith in God. He expanded the “eternal life” from a small circle of eyewitnesses to a larger, community-like company of believers. John had proclaimed his experience of the historical Jesus to “you” (ὁμεῖς, *humeis*). Consequently, Christians of Ephesus and its environs had been drawn into the “fellowship.” With an emphatic “you” (*humeis*), John said of his readers that they had become part of a community where “fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1:3). The progression was important: witness to proclamation to fellowship to joy. Before the author addressed the message of the antichrists and those who had gone out from the church to follow the antichrists, he wanted to establish that his own fellowship with them was based on the common fellowship they had with God.

John now set forth for his readers his purpose in writing. It was “so that our joy may be made complete” (1:4). Instead of “our joy,” both the KJV and the NKJV have “your joy.” In fact, many more recent Greek manuscripts of 1 John and some of the older translations into various languages have “your joy.” The oldest manuscripts, the ones that are highly esteemed for their accuracy, have “our joy.” How do textual scholars decide which reading is more likely to be the original, “your joy” or “our joy”? The passage has a different nuance depending on which pronoun is used.

The choice between “your joy” and “our joy”

illustrates an important textual principle. Normally, the reading is judged to have been original if it explains how the other came to be. The reasoning is that an ancient copyist would have been more likely to anticipate that John would write "your joy" than he would have been to anticipate "our joy." "Our joy" is more difficult. A copyist would not likely have taken an easier reading, in this case, "your joy," and changed it to something more difficult, "our joy." Hence, the more difficult reading, on the face of it, is more likely to be the original one. When one adds to that the fact that most of the oldest copies of 1 John have "our joy," the evidence is strong that John wrote "our joy."

The difference between "your joy" and "our joy" is not of earthshaking importance, but the difference between them is not trivial either. By writing "our joy," John demonstrated that he was not afraid to confess that his own spiritual well-being was in some way dependent on the well-being of his readers. His joy in Christ was made complete when his readers realized that Jesus of Nazareth had been as real as they were. He shared in human flesh and blood. John wanted his readers to know that Christian joy is a quality that is born of a mutual confession and support. When the readers of 1 John listened to the antichrists, when they denied Jesus in the flesh, they took John's joy away from him. The doctrinal affirmation of his readers contributed to the Christian joy or the lack of joy John experienced.