

# 1 John Chapter 1

## Exegetical Notes

**1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life;

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Irenaus tells us that 1 John was written to deal with Cerentian Gnosticism. Elements of this brand of gnosticism are:

- a. Christ was not divine. The “Christ Spirit” descended on the human Jesus at his baptism and left sometime prior to his crucifixion.
- b. Antinomianism. Gnosticism is basically founded in philisophical dualism which teaches that matter is evil and spirit is good. Therefore, what one does with the physical body is of no spiritual consequence.
- c. A denial of the physical resurrection of Christ. Christ arose as a glorified spirit, but not in physical form.

It appears as though some of the heretics had left the church (1 John 2:18-19). However, John writes to encourage the true believers of the reality of their faith.

Evidence suggests that 1 John was written sometime between A.D. 85-90:

- a. John could not have gotten to Ephesus until some time after Paul’s death, say A.D. 67-68.
- b. The epistle must have been written some time after the destruction of Jerusalem since there is no mention of the sacrificial system or nation itself.
- c. 1 John fits in very well with the Gospel of John, and hence must have been written about the same time.

“That which was from the beginning” is a reference to Christ. The phrase “the beginning” is often used to refer to the period before beginning of time. A clear reference to Christ’s deity is seen here.

John hits right at the foundation of gnostic heresy by saying four fundamental truths about Christ:

- a. We heard him. The present tense of this statement indicates that the Word was heard in the past with continuing results.
- b. We saw him. Again, the perfect tense indicates a past action with continuing results.
- c. We looked upon him. The word here is *theaomai*, from which we get theatre. It is a sustained and close examination. Christ was thoroughly looked upon.

- d. We handled him. This refers to physical touch. Christ was not some glorified ghost or non-corporeal being. He was flesh and bone (Luke 24:39, John 20:27).

The “Word” is used by John as a reference to Christ in his revelatory and communicative sense (John 1:1, 14). The “Word” revealed God to man.

Not only is the “Word” the source of information about God, but he is the source of life. We could translate this phrase, “the Word *which is* life”.

**2** (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;)

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Verse 2 is a parenthetical statement which is inserted between verse 1 and verse 3. (Verse 1 contains the direct object of verse 3).

Not only is Christ the source of life, but he is life, eternal life.

Eternal life (*zoan tan aionion*) does not refer to duration, but quality. Everyone has life which never ends, but only believers have eternal life which is the quality of life enjoyed in the presence of God.

Note that this eternal life was manifested to us. Man did not discover God on his own, rather, God revealed himself to mankind. God manifested himself to man in the person of his Son.

John clearly states his life purpose, that of bearing witness to the life of Christ. John is writing this book some sixty years after walking with Christ, and even now he is bearing witness (again, present tense in the Greek) to the life of Christ.

John says furthermore that this life was with the Father (*pro ton patera*, face to face with God). Christ came out of the very presence of God to bear witness of the Father. In John 17 we see Christ looking forward to returning to that face-to-face relationship with the Father.

**3** That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

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John’s purpose for writing the book is seen in this verse. It is so his readers may have “fellowship” not only with the Apostles, but with Christ and the Father.

Fellowship (*koinonia*) means “sharing.” This what Christ had in mind in his high-priestly prayer recorded in John 17 when he told the father that he wanted the disciples to be with him where he was so that they may share in his glory.

**4** And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.

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And what is the result of the sharing we have with the Apostles and with Christ and God himself, but Joy!

Note that this joy is not just a smidgen, but it is an overflowing joy. The word *peplaromeno* was used to refer to a cup that was so full it was running over. John's fervent hope is that this letter will bring an overflowing joy to his readers.

**5** This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

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1 John can be outline in several different ways. Burdick sees three cycles: Cycle 1 sees the Christian life as fellowship with the Father and the Son (1:5-2:28), Cycle 2 sees the Christian life as divine sonship (2:29-4:6) and Cycle 3 sees the Christian life as an interweaving of the ethical and doctrinal (4:7-5:12).

Others outline John as a series of tests of true salvation. In vv. 1-4 we see the test of fellowship, in vv. 5-10 the test of confession of sin, etc.

In any case, in verses 5-9 we are confronted with issue of the confession of sin. John points out in no uncertain terms that a believer's life is one characterized by walking in the light and the confession of sin.

John's use of "light" to refer to God is a most apt metaphor. Light is that which dispels darkness, and Christ is the light which dispels spiritual darkness. In John 1:4-9 we read that Christ is the "light which lighteth every man", and in John 8 Christ proclaims himself as the "light of the world." Paul tells us we have been translated out of the kingdom of darkness into the kingdom of God's marvelous son (Colossians 1:14), and in Ephesians 5:8 Paul tells us that we were once the children of darkness but are now the children of light.

God is not only light, but in him there is no darkness, not even a little bit. In God, there is a complete absence of darkness.

**6** If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth:

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Since God is light, it follows that those who claim to know him should walk in the light as well. John states this negatively in this verse.

If we say we have fellowship with God, who is light, and walk in darkness (spiritual and moral), then we are liars and do not do the truth.

Walk, *peripatomen*, refers to one's conduct. One's manner of life will either witness positively or negatively about one's true relationship with God.

Note that to John this is an either/or proposition. John sees salvation from the perspective of regeneration. As far as life is concerned, one is either dead or alive, not both. Similarly, as far as eternal life is concerned, one is either alive or dead spiritually, not both. This is not contradictory to Paul, but supportive of Paul.

**7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.

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The positive side of the believer's walk is seen in this verse. Positively, if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, we have fellowship with him.

Note that this fellowship is a continual fellowship, and that the cleansing one receives because of sin is a continual cleansing. Here we see that John is not proclaiming moral perfection as a mark of true belief, but direction. When a believer does sin, and confesses that sin, it is immediately forgiven and the fellowship with God goes on unhindered.

Another great truth seen here is that the cleansing is a complete and total cleansing. There are not some sin stains harder for God to get out than others. There are no sins too heinous for God to forgive.

**8** If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

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John strikes another blow at the notion of moral perfection by stating in this verse that if one says they have no sin, they are liars. All of us sin, and all of us stumble in our walk with God. The difference is that the believer confesses their sin.

Note that there are two consequences to denying sin. One is that we deceive ourselves (Jeremiah 17:9), the other is that we are liars, and as a result compound our sin.

Another twist on this verse is that it is quite possible John has in mind the gnostics who denied any innate sinfulness. To them, matter was evil but the spirit was divine. Therefore, whatever they did with their bodies had no impact on their divine spirit, and as such they saw themselves without sin and without a need for a savior.

**9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

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Put up against the negative of verse eight is the positive of verse nine. Believers are those who confess their sin. The word confess, *homolegeo*, means "to say the same thing as." Believers do not make excuses for their sin, they say the same thing about their sin as God does. Proverbs

28:13 says, "He that covers his sins shall not prosper but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall find mercy." God can forgive us for all of our sins, but none of our excuses.

Confession is also in the perfect tense, which means it is an on-going and continuous activity. A believer is one who is constantly confessing their sin as it is committed, not someone who saves their confession for a once-a-week trip to the confessional or to church.

Some people have had problems with the conditional statement about cleansing, thinking that if they forgot to confess a sin, God will not forgive it and as a result they will miss heaven. John is not talking about positional forgiveness, but relational forgiveness. God has already positionally forgiven all our sins, but as we sin in life as believers we need to parentally ask for forgiveness to restore communion.

**10** If we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

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John once again turns to the negative aspect of denying sin. The difference here is that in verse eight talks about the denial of indwelling sin, verse ten talks about the denial of acts of sin.

Those who deny they sin have no need of God's forgiveness and hence no need of a saviour. One of the primary tasks of the Holy Spirit is to bring about a consciousness of sin (John 16:8-11). Only when a person is convicted of sin will they see their need of a saviour and turn to him for salvation.