

An Expository Study of 1 John  
Part 1 (of 10 parts):

## **An Exposition of 1 John 1:1-4**

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The forceful simplicity of its utterances, the grand theological truths it portrays, and the unwavering ethical demands of its teaching have made 1 John a favorite with Christians everywhere. It is as vital and relevant today as it was when it was first written.

### **Introduction to 1 John**

This epistle does not display the regular features of a letter as seen in the models of contemporary correspondence; yet in the early listings of the New Testament books it was always classified as a "letter." Its contents indicate that it arose out of a definite life situation and was intended to meet the needs of its recipients. It was a written communication to a group or groups of readers personally known to the writer. The absence of all that is merely local supports its description "as encyclical or circular in nature and pastoral in function."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Donald W. Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle: An In-Depth Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1985), p. 70.

The epistle is anonymous, but from earliest times the view has prevailed in the church that John the Apostle was its author.<sup>2</sup> It portrays an author who was well known to the readers, one who spoke from direct personal knowledge with an inner sense of authority that felt no need to justify his position of authority among believers. This view was held almost unanimously until the rise of modern critical scholarship. The varied arguments against the traditional view have not proved convincing to theologically conservative scholars.<sup>3</sup> "There is . . . no good reason," Hodges asserts, "for denying the traditional belief that the letter is of apostolic authorship."<sup>4</sup> The view of apostolic authorship agrees with the persistent Christian tradition that the Apostle John spent the closing years of his long life at Ephesus, where he carried out an extensive evangelistic and pastoral ministry to the regions around.<sup>5</sup>

The writer apparently had no direct part in the original evangelization of the readers addressed (2:7, 24). Yet he was intimately acquainted with their spiritual condition and felt a warm personal affection for them. These churches apparently had already existed for many years and most members were advanced in their knowledge of Christian truth (2:7, 20-21, 24, 27; 3:11). They were characterized by a certain homogeneity; they faced a common spiritual peril because of false teachers who sought to lead them astray (2:26).

In support of the traditional view that the letter was written at Ephesus, Barker notes that this is in accord with the direct statement of Irenaeus (*Against Heresies* 3. 1. 1) as well as the fact that "the earliest-known references to the epistle are by church leaders from Asia."<sup>6</sup> The church fathers did not indicate the date

<sup>2</sup> For a fuller discussion see D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, vol. 3: The Non-Pauline Epistles and Revelation (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), pp. 182-97.

<sup>3</sup> See Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, pp. 7-37, and the literature cited there.

<sup>4</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, SP Publications, 1983), p. 881.

<sup>5</sup> On John's Ephesian ministry and the question of "John the elder" see Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 191-97.

<sup>6</sup> Glenn W. Barker, "1 John," in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), p. 294.

of John's arrival at Ephesus, but apparently he labored there for some time before writing this epistle. There is no mention of the church being persecuted by the state; if this marks the actual absence of persecution, the epistle may be dated after the death of Emperor Domitian in A.D. 96, or more probably before the beginning of the Domitian persecution, which according to Eusebius (*Ecclesiastical History* 3. 18) began in the latter part of his reign. This suggests a date around A.D. 97, or more probably around A.D. 80-85. More recently a date between A.D. 60 and 65 has been suggested.<sup>7</sup>

The purpose stated in 1 John 5:13, looking back over the whole epistle, indicates John's desire to ground his readers in the personal assurance of salvation. Related is his desire for their victory over sin (2:1), assuring fullness of joy in Christian fellowship (1:4). He also sought to alert them against increasing susceptibility toward the world and its views (2:15-17), and to arrest any proneness to reinterpret their faith in terms of prevailing "modern thought" by exposing them to the errors of false teachers (2:26).

The Greco-Roman world of the first century was a veritable babble of competing voices, and there was a strong desire on the part of various individuals to syncretize these divergent religious and philosophical views. It is generally agreed that the heresy confronted in 1 John was some form or forms of Gnosticism, but it is unwarranted to identify it with the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century. Among the numerous converts won to Christianity in Asia doubtless were former adherents of religious systems marked by Gnostic tendencies. Some of those converts soon sought to syncretize their old views with their newly accepted Christianity. Sharp controversy arose when they sought to propagate their new interpretations and they withdrew (2:19). But they did not sever all their contacts with members of the churches (2:26). A fuller development of the varied Gnostic views may indeed have been promoted by these heretics after their withdrawal from the churches. That the incipient elements of Gnosticism were active in the first century is clear.

As a speculative philosophy of religion, Gnosticism was marked by a kaleidoscopic variety of views. Basic was the dualistic view that spirit is good and matter is inherently evil, and.

<sup>7</sup> Hodges, "1 John," p. 882. See John A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), p 307.

that the two are in perpetual antagonism. This assumed dualism created a gulf between the true God and this material world. The Gnostics, meaning "knowing ones," held that spiritual excellence consisted not in a holy life but in their superior knowledge, which enabled them to rise above the earthbound chains of matter in their apprehension of the heavenly truth that had been made known to them. This knowledge, they claimed, had been made known to them through Christ as the Messenger of the true God. Thus "the gnostic Christ was not a saviour; he was a revealer. He came for the express purpose of communicating his secret gnosis."<sup>8</sup> This undermined the Christian view of sin and the atonement.

Acceptance of Gnostic dualism made the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation unthinkable; two alternative views were advanced. Docetic Gnosticism<sup>9</sup> held that Christ seemed to have a human body; His supposed humanity was a phantom. Cerinthian Gnosticism, named after Cerinthus, a late contemporary of John at Ephesus, held that the man Jesus, son of Joseph and Mary, was preeminent in righteousness and wisdom, that "the Christ" came on Him at His baptism and empowered His ministry, but left Him before His crucifixion; it was only a man who died and rose again. Either view eliminated the Incarnation and nullified Christ's atoning work.

Since the Gnostics held that fellowship with God comes through the esoteric knowledge brought by Christ, they often expressed their assumed enlightenment in scandalous disregard of the ethical demands of Christianity. At other times their view led to asceticism. In opposition, John insisted that true Christian knowledge, which comes as a result of the anointing of the Holy One (2:20), involves spiritual enlightenment as well as holiness of life (1:5-2:5). For true assurance of eternal life (5:13) the Christological test as well as the ethical test must be applied.

### **The Reality of the Incarnation**

What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of life

<sup>8</sup> Ronald H. Nash, *Christianity and the Hellenistic World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 222.

<sup>9</sup> The name is derived from the Greek verb *δοκέω* meaning "to seem." The expression *τὸ δοκεῖν* denoted something in appearance (only).

and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness 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, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete (1 John 1:1-4).

This weighty and challenging opening paragraph plunges into the heart of the Christian message, proclaiming that eternal life has been manifested in the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. This paragraph is unusually involved and intense, unlike John's normal style. "It gives the impression that the author was so 'full of his subject,' so overwhelmed by the truth he sought to express, that his thoughts became crowded and his expression complicated."<sup>10</sup>

John asserted the reality of the apostolic encounter with the incarnate Word of life (v. 1), parenthetically declared the historical manifestation of eternal life (v. 2), and set forth the personal issues of the apostolic proclamation (vv. 3-4). The very structure of this opening paragraph is illustrative of the spiraling movement of John's thought.

## THE APOSTOLIC ENCOUNTER WITH THE WORD OF LIFE

The four opening clauses, each beginning with "what" (ὃ), are parallel in scope and declare the reality of the Incarnation. All four are the direct objects of the verb "proclaim" (ἀπαγγέλομεν), which is not actually expressed until verse 3.<sup>11</sup> This use of the neuter "what" does not mean that John had in view an abstract message; rather he was thinking about the comprehensive reality of the historical manifestation of eternal life in the incarnate Christ. The first clause relates to the Incarnation itself, the remaining three declare the apostolic experiences with Christ. The opening clause, "What was from the beginning" (ὃ ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς), has been variously understood. Ebrard remarked, "These words, considered in themselves, may say all that it is possible to say; and yet, when they are isolated, they declare fundamentally

<sup>10</sup> Harvey J. S. Blaney, "The First Epistle of John," in *Beacon Bible Commentary* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1969), 10:349.

<sup>11</sup> The NIV inserts "this we proclaim" in verse 1 because of the suspended construction created by verse 2.

nothing."<sup>12</sup> Clearly their significance must be seen in the light of what follows.

Some hold that these words "apparently mean nothing other than what John 1:1 expresses in the form 'Εν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος ('In the beginning was the word')."<sup>13</sup> Plummer accepted this connection with a recognized difference; in John 1:1 "the point is that the Word existed before the creation; here that the Word existed before the Incarnation."<sup>14</sup> But in view of the four parallel clauses, such a time reference is not obvious; the others clearly refer to the Incarnation. The force of these words depends on the intended meaning of "was from the beginning" (ἦν ἀπ' ἀρχῆς). The imperfect verb "was" denotes continuing existence as limited by "from the beginning." The "beginning" in view here has been variously understood. Some, like Plummer<sup>15</sup> and Burdick,<sup>16</sup> understand the expression to mean "from all eternity." The expression has also been taken to mean from the beginning of creation, from the beginning of Christ's ministry, or even from "the earliest stage of the Christian Church."<sup>17</sup> The meaning of "the beginning" must always be determined by the context.<sup>18</sup> In keeping with the following clauses, it seems best to understand that "beginning" here points to the unique events, described in Luke 1–2 that characterized the actual Incarnation, which John is proclaiming. "John's message must seem incredible until we start where he starts—at Bethlehem."<sup>19</sup>

Used without the definite article, "beginning" (ἀρχή) does not so much point to a specific event, which went largely unnoticed by

<sup>12</sup> John H. A. Ebrard, *Biblical Commentary on the Epistles of St. John*, trans. W. B. Pope (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1860), p. 46.

<sup>13</sup> Rudolf Bultmann, *The Johannine Epistles*, Hermeneia (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1973), pp. 7-8.

<sup>14</sup> Alfred Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges (reprint, Cambridge: University Press, 1938), p. 72.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 97.

<sup>17</sup> R. R. Williams, *The Letters of John and James*, Cambridge Bible Commentary, New English Bible (Cambridge: University Press, 1965), p. 17.

<sup>18</sup> "Beginning" (ἀρχή) occurs nine times in 1 John, with varied shades of meaning (cf. 2:7, 13; 3:8).

<sup>19</sup> R. E. O. White, *Open Letter to Evangelicals* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 27.

the world, but rather serves to characterize the event as a new beginning in God's manner of speaking to mankind (Heb. 1:1-2). This clause starts with the Incarnation, while the following clauses focus attention on the manifestation of the incarnate Christ during His ministry. The manifestation of the Christ did not begin at Jesus' baptism, as Cerinthus taught; the verb "was" (ἦν) marks the continued fact of the Incarnation since the birth of the Virgin Mary's Babe in Bethlehem. John's thought in this verse parallels John 1:14, "The Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory."

The three following neuter clauses depict aspects of the apostolic experiences with the incarnate Christ. "We," the personal subject of all the following verbs in verse 1, is not to be limited to John alone as an "editorial" we; rather, John was speaking as the representative of the apostles, all of whom bore united witness to the reality of the Incarnation. These four verbs summarize their experiences with Jesus during the years of His ministry and imply a growing intimacy with Him.

"What we have heard" (ὃ ἀκηκόαμεν) implies a speaker from whom they received a message; that message came from a historical Person and includes all the varied statements and activities of the Speaker in communicating His message. The words "have heard" imply that their hearing Him personally has terminated, but His message still continues to ring in John's ears.

The words "what we have seen with our eyes" (ὃ ἑώρακάμεν τοῖς ὀφθαλμοῖς ἡμῶν) declare the visual encounter of the apostles with the incarnate Christ. "With our eyes" underlines that what they observed was no phantom, or inward or spiritual vision. "The addition with our eyes, like our hands below, emphasises the idea of direct personal outward experience in a matter marvellous in itself."<sup>20</sup> The perfect tense again implies that what they had seen still lingered before the mind's eye.

Further evidence for the Incarnation from the sense of sight and of touch is given in the words "what we beheld and our hands handled." "What we beheld" is no mere repetition. The verb now used (ἐθεασάμεθα) denotes intelligent beholding, "a careful and deliberate vision which interprets . . . its object."<sup>21</sup> The use of the

<sup>20</sup> Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John* (reprint, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1950), p. 6.

<sup>21</sup> G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3d ed.

aorist tense now points back to this gazing on Him as a historical fact, as in John 1:14, "we beheld His glory."

"And our hands handled" (καὶ αἱ χεῖρες ἡμῶν ἐψηλάφησαν) brings in the experience of deliberate touch as the culminating evidence for the reality of the Incarnation. The aorist tense points to the historical fact. John spoke not of a mere accidental brushing against the body of Jesus, but of a purposeful touching of His body as a verification of its reality. This verb was used by Jesus, after His resurrection, to challenge the disciples to prove the reality of His bodily presence (Luke 24:39; cf. John 20:27). But, as Burdick well notes, "In the context of 1 John 1:1, the apostle is not trying to prove the reality of the resurrection. His point here is that Jesus was most surely incarnate in a 'flesh-and-bones' body."<sup>22</sup>

Following these four object clauses no governing verb is expressed. Instead of the governing verb, John continued with a prepositional phrase standing in apposition to all that has preceded, "concerning the Word of life" (περὶ τοῦ λόγου τῆς ζωῆς). "Concerning" (περὶ) summarily relates all that has preceded as gathering around "the Word of life," setting forth the central subject of the epistle. The use of the definite article with both nouns (lit. "the Word of the life") makes both nouns distinct while combining the two concepts.

Some interpreters, like Westcott,<sup>23</sup> Dodd,<sup>24</sup> and Houlden,<sup>25</sup> hold that "the Word" refers here to the message conveyed by the gospel. Thus Westcott holds that it refers to "the whole Gospel, of which He is the centre and sum, and not to Himself personally."<sup>26</sup> It is suggested that the four preceding neuter clauses support this nonpersonal meaning. But the use of the neuter pronouns may well be understood to refer to what John declares concerning the incarnate Word of life. Advocates of the personal meaning here point out that the preceding statements are not really impersonal. Thus Marshall observes, "It is a strange message which is visible,

(Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937), p. 203.

<sup>22</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 99.

<sup>23</sup> Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Row, 1946), pp. 3-6.

<sup>25</sup> J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Harper's New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 50-52.

<sup>26</sup> Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, p. 7.

and the qualification 'with our eyes' leaves no doubt that literal seeing is meant."<sup>27</sup> And it may be asked, How can a manifestation of the gospel be handled and personally touched? That "the Word" here carries a personal implication seems obvious. But in reality the subject matter and the Person are identical in a unique fashion. The incarnate Christ is both God's message and Himself the Messenger. He is the embodiment of divine life and the Revealer of that life to mankind (John 14:6-9).

#### THE HISTORICAL MANIFESTATION OF THE ETERNAL LIFE

Structurally verse 2 forms a parenthesis in John's involved opening sentence. The conjunctive "and" (καὶ) points to another thought added to what has already been said, affirming the historical appearing and eternal nature of "the life" just mentioned. The clause "and the life was manifested" (καὶ ἡ ζωὴ ἐφανερώθη) declares the historical fact, comprehensively setting forth the appearing of the incarnate Life here on earth. For John this Life was not an abstract principle but a real Person. The verb "was manifested," common in John's writings, comprehends the process whereby this Life became visible and tangible; the passive implies the divine initiative behind the disclosure. Vine notes that in Scripture this verb denotes more than mere appearance: "to be manifested is to be revealed in one's true character."<sup>28</sup>

Another "and" connects this historical reality with the personal experience and testimony of the apostles: "and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life." "We have seen" (ἑώρακάμεν) again declares that this incarnate Life was the object of intelligible, abiding sense perception on the part of the apostles. They perceived His true identity, again viewed as having an abiding impact. Another "and" further connects their past experience with a double present activity: "and bear witness and proclaim to you" (καὶ μαρτυροῦμεν καὶ ἀπαγγέλλομεν ὑμῖν). The two present tense verbs convey two aspects of the same activity. As Haupt noted, in the first verb "the emphasis lies on the communication of *truth*," while in the second "the emphasis lies

<sup>27</sup> I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1978), p. 101.

<sup>28</sup> W. E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words with Their Precise Meanings for English Readers* (reprint, Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1966), 1:65.

on the *communication* of truth."<sup>29</sup> "We," as the subject of both verbs, expresses John's deep sense of solidarity with the apostolic testimony. "More than one man's personal memories lay behind the apostolic testimony."<sup>30</sup>

The object of their authoritative proclamation was "the eternal life" (τὴν ζωὴν τὴν αἰώνιον), literally, "the life, the eternal [life]." The article with the adjective "eternal" underlines the quality of this life. While this adjective, like the cognate noun, αἰών, "age," may at times be applied to a long but limited period of time, its predominant usage in the New Testament denotes eternal or unending duration. As Hogg and Vine note,

It is used of persons and things which are in their nature endless, as, e.g., of God, Rom. 16. 26, of His power, I Tim. 6. 16, and of His glory, I Pet. 5. 10; of the Holy Spirit, Heb. 9. 14; of the redemption effected by Christ, 9. 12, and of the consequent salvation of men, 5. 9, as well as of His future rule, 2 Pet. 1. 11, which is elsewhere declared to be without end, Luke 1. 33; of the life received by those who believe in Christ, John 3. 16, concerning which He said "they shall never perish," 10. 28, and of the resurrection body, 2 Cor. 5. 1.<sup>31</sup>

This life is characterized not merely by unending continuance but by the very nature of God. Its eternal, preexistent quality is explicitly declared in the added identification, "which was with the Father" (ἣτις ἦν πρὸς τὸν πατέρα). The word "which" (ἣτις) is a compound relative pronoun that carries the idea of characteristic quality as well as identity, "which was such as." It marks the distinctive identity of this Life as a Person who "was with the Father." The verb "was" denotes past continuing existence, while the preposition "with" (πρὸς) depicts the continuing "face-to-face" relationship with the Father, distinct from the Father yet in active fellowship with the Father as equals. In John 1:1 this relationship with the Father is assigned to "the Word," and here it refers to "the life" as personal and preexistent, that is, the preincarnate Christ.

This personal, preexistent Life "was manifested to us" in the incarnate Jesus. The repeated verb "was manifested" underlines

<sup>29</sup> Erich Haupt, *The First Epistle of St. John: A Contribution to Biblical Theology*, trans. W. B. Pope (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1893), p. 17 (italics his).

<sup>30</sup> White, *Open Letter to Evangelicals*, p. 29.

<sup>31</sup> C. F. Hogg and W. E. Vine, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians* (reprint, London: Pickering & Inglis, 1959), pp. 232-33.

this fact as a unique historical reality. The words "to us" return the thought to the personal encounter of the apostles with this incarnate Life.

#### THE PERSONAL ISSUES OF THE APOSTOLIC PROCLAMATION

In verses 3-4 John advanced to the crucial significance of the Incarnation for himself and his readers. He summarized the content of the proclamation (v. 3a), indicated their aim in making that proclamation (v. 3b), asserted the true nature of their fellowship (v. 3c), and stated the intended goal in writing (v. 4).

In verse 3 John resumed the sentence begun in verse 1, but because of the parenthesis in verse 2, he repeated two verbs, "what we have seen and heard," in reverse order and united under one relative pronoun, "what" (ὃ). The observed reality of the Incarnation and the instructive message heard was then proclaimed. As John wrote, "we proclaim to you also" (ἀπαγγέλλομεν καὶ ὑμῖν). This compound verb, which occurs only here in this epistle in verses 2-3, suggests the thought of passing on to others what has been given to them. Orr observes, "The habitual sense of the present tense may be understood here: *we make it our business to proclaim.*"<sup>32</sup> The sense of privilege and duty prompted their proclamation. The "also" (καὶ)<sup>33</sup> may mean that others beside John were proclaiming this message to the readers, or more probably that the apostle was giving his message to them as well as to others.

John's proclamation to his readers has a clear intended result horizontally, "that you also may have fellowship with us" (ἵνα καὶ ὑμεῖς κοινωνίαν ἔχητε μεθ' ἡμῶν). The words "you also" suggest that though the readers did not have the same personal experience with the incarnate Christ that the apostles had, yet they could experience the same spiritual fellowship with them. The present-tense verb "may have" (ἔχητε) indicates that by continuing to adhere to the full truth in Christ they could continue to enjoy the full fruit of the revelation. John was anxious that his

<sup>32</sup> R. W. Orr, "The Letters of John," in *A New Testament Commentary*, ed. G. C. D. Howley (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1969), p. 609.

<sup>33</sup> The καὶ is omitted in the Textus Receptus. See Zane C. Hodges and Arthur L. Farstad, *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), p. 705. For the strong textual evidence in support of including Kai see Kurt Aland et al., *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th ed. (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, n.d.). The NIV does not represent the καὶ in its rendering.

readers would not allow the false teachers to mar or disrupt their mutual fellowship by perverting the apostolic message.

The noun "fellowship" (*κοινωνία*), based on the Greek adjective meaning "common" (*κοινός*), denotes the active participation or sharing in what one has in common with others. The nature of what is mutually shared molds the nature of the group. Here, as in Acts 2:42, the intimate bond of fellowship that unites the group is their common faith in Christ, based on the apostolic message. By its very nature the new life in Christ creates and stimulates the desire for such fellowship. The Christian life is a call not for isolation but for active participation with other believers in this new life.

Desiring to preserve and promote this horizontal fellowship, John declared the vital vertical aspect of Christian fellowship: "and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ." That more needs to be said about Christian fellowship is stressed by John's use of two conjunctions rendered "and indeed" (*καὶ . . . δὲ*). "And" (*καὶ*) again is connective, while the second conjunction (*δὲ*) indicates that something more but different needs to be said. The words "and indeed our fellowship" (*καὶ ἡ κοινωνία δὲ ἡ ἡμετέρα*, lit. "and the fellowship, moreover, the ours") prepare for this vital Godward aspect of Christian fellowship. The expression *ἡ ἡμετέρα* is a strong one; it is not the genitive of the personal pronoun but rather the first person plural of the possessive pronoun, emphasizing an actual mutual possession. This plural may be understood as restricted to the apostles, but it is more natural to hold that John deliberately chose this form to include his readers with him in this further aspect of their fellowship. No verb is used in the Greek, but English versions generally supply "is" to denote a positive assertion. For true believers this Godward fellowship is a fact, though a call to deepen it is always in order. This vertical fellowship is vital for true fellowship horizontally. Each reflects and influences the other.

The true grandeur of this vertical fellowship is grounded in the fact that it is "with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ" (*μετὰ τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ μετὰ τοῦ υἱοῦ αὐτοῦ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*). The repetition of both the preposition and the definite article emphatically marks the distinction and equality of the Father and the Son. Both the Father and the Son are one in Godhood. The preposition *μετὰ* marks the thought of association between the persons involved in the fellowship. Dammers remarks that the thought is of "communion with God, not absorption in Him; a

vital distinction to make in Hindu and Buddhist lands today as it was in John's Hellenistic world."<sup>34</sup>

John had learned the designations "the Father" and "His Son" from the lips of Jesus. The full designation "His Son Jesus Christ" is solemn and weighty, uniting the two aspects of His Person. The words "His Son" explicitly declare the divine nature of the Person historically known as "Jesus Christ." "Jesus," which means "The Lord is salvation," is the name associated with His humanity, while "Christ," meaning "the Anointed One," denotes His messianic identity. "This identification," Burdick notes, "leaves no room for any kind of Gnostic distinction between the divine Son and the human Jesus."<sup>35</sup>

While clearly marking the distinctness and equality in nature between the Father and the Son, John draws them together as the true object of our Godward fellowship. Candlish well observes,

In some views and for some ends it may be quite warrantable, and even necessary, to distinguish the fellowship which you have with the Father from that which you have with his Son Jesus Christ. As Christ is the way, the truth and living way to the Father, so fellowship with him as such must evidently be preparatory to fellowship with the Father. But it is not thus that Christ is here represented. He is not put before the Father as the way to the Father, fellowship with whom is the means, leading to fellowship with the Father as the end. He is associated with the Father. Together, in their mutual relation to one another and their mutual mind or heart to one another, they constitute the one object of this fellowship.<sup>36</sup>

In verse 4 John stated the goal of his letter: "And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete." "And" (καὶ) introduces another aspect to this glorious picture. While some have understood "these things" (ταῦτα) as referring to the whole epistle, the pronoun, which more naturally refers to the things near at hand, seems best understood as denoting the things discussed in verses 1-3. In saying "we write" (γράφομεν ἡμεῖς) John now narrowed the scope of the apostolic witness and proclamation to the written communication that was presently engaging his attention

<sup>34</sup> A. H. Dammers, *God Is Light, God Is Love: A Running Commentary on the First Letter of John* (New York: Association Press, 1963), p. 19.

<sup>35</sup> Burdick, *The Letters of John the Apostle*, p. 106.

<sup>36</sup> Robert S. Candlish, *The First Epistle of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, n.d.), pp. 7-8.

and efforts. His emphatic "we" (ἡμεῖς)<sup>37</sup> underlines that he was doing so in keeping with his apostolic commission.

The statement of purpose, "so that our joy may be made complete" (ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν ᾗ πεπληρωμένη), presents a well-known textual variant. The manuscripts are fairly evenly divided between the pronouns "our" (ἡμῶν) and "your" (ὑμῶν). Both make good sense. "Your joy," the reading of the Textus Receptus,<sup>38</sup> gives the normally expected sense and agrees with John's expressed concern for his readers. If "your" was the original reading it is difficult to see why the scribes would make the change. Remembering John 16:24, "that your joy may be made full," they would be prone to change the unexpected first person plural to the second person. The reading "our joy," intrinsically more difficult, seems to be the original reading. This reading may be understood as a delicate personal touch referring to the writer personally, being "similar to one the same author made in 3 John 4: 'I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.'"<sup>39</sup>

"Our joy" may also be understood in an inclusive sense to include both writer and readers. Thus The New English Bible reads, "the joy of us all."<sup>40</sup> This inclusive meaning seems natural in view of the possessive plural pronoun "our fellowship" in verse 3 above. It is an instance of pastor and people rejoicing together in the fellowship of the gospel (cf. John 4:36).

The "joy" in view is "that serene happiness, which is the result of conscious union with God and good men, of conscious possession of eternal life . . . and which raises us above pain and sorrow and remorse."<sup>41</sup> The perfect subjunctive "may be made complete" (ᾗ πεπληρωμένη) sets forth the final goal of the apostolic ministry, but because of present circumstances that joy may not yet be an abiding reality.

<sup>37</sup> "To you" (ὑμῖν) is the reading of the majority of the manuscripts; see Hodges and Farstad, *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*. But some textual critics hold that "copyists were more likely to alter γράφομεν ἡμεῖς to the expected γράφομεν ὑμῖν . . . than vice versa" (Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* [London: United Bible Societies, 1971], p. 708).

<sup>38</sup> See Hodges and Farstad, *The Greek New Testament according to the Majority Text*.

<sup>39</sup> Hodges, "1 John," p. 884.

<sup>40</sup> *The New English Bible*, 2d ed. (Oxford University Press, 1970).

<sup>41</sup> Plummer, *The Epistles of S. John*, p. 77.

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