

First John Chapter One

The opening section (vv.1-4) describes the **manifestation** of eternal life in the person of the Son of God. Faith in Him brings a believer into the *privilege* of fellowship with the Father (v.3). But the second section (vv.5-10) indicates that *profession* of fellowship with God involves great *responsibility* as indicated by the **message** Christ brought (v.5). There is then presented a threefold test which declares the reality of a person's fellowship with God (vv. 6, 8, 10). These are interlaced with *three* spiritual provisions for true believers to establish and maintain the enjoyment of such fellowship, namely *cleansing* (v.7), *confession* (v.9) and *Christ* (2.1-2).

The Manifestation of Life [1.1-4]

v.1: The Person who is eternal life has been manifested on earth and was heard, seen and handled by the apostles. The first *three* verses form one long sentence describing the message they 'declared' (v.3). The neuter pronoun ('that which') does not describe Christ personally, but comprehensively expresses the whole scope of His person, works and words. It embraces the person *and* message of the Word of life. The 'Word' is a personal title of the Lord Jesus. He is the full revelation of the essence of God (cf. John 1.1; Revelation 19.13). 'Word (logos) of life' suggests He is the personal *manifestation* and *source* of divine (i.e. eternal) life (John 17.3).

'From the beginning' (x9 in 1 John) refers to different times depending on the context. It can refer to the beginning of the Lord's public ministry (Luke 1.2; John 6.64; 8.25) *or* the beginning of the apostolic ministry (2.24). Given the context of the manifestation of the Word of life, the first could be true here. However, when the phrase is used in relation to divine persons, the thought of *eternity* is presented (cf. Habakkuk 1.12; Micah 5.2 LXX). That which 'was' (imperfect, what always has been, abided) *from* the beginning. Thus, John is showing the eternal pre-existence of the Word of life. The expression is also parallel to 'which was (imperfect) with (alongside) the Father' (v.2). So, 'He who existed from limitless eternity has entered time and space and taken up residence here on earth' (Burge).

The embodiment of eternal life has distinct dimensions. Not only is He eternal, but *audible*, *visible* and *tangible*. First, He was **heard** (necessary for our fallen condition, Romans 10.17). The tense suggests a repeated experience now complete, but which still has present results. The words of Christ were literally ringing (60 years later) in the ears of the aged apostle! What they heard of Christ had a transforming impact on their lives. Perhaps the first words John heard from Christ were 'What seek ye?' and 'Come and see' (John 1.38-39). But it wasn't a *distant* voice, hence 'which we have **seen** with our eyes'. Christ was no *apparition* and John is not speaking of a *spiritual* vision in his mind. He was an eyewitness of the manifested Word of life and the things he had seen had left an indelible impression on his mind's eye. Third, Christ was '**looked upon**' meaning to 'gaze upon as a spectacle' (theatre). They carefully and attentively contemplated Him (a long, searching gaze, cf. John 1.14), and intellectually interpreted the significance of what they were seeing. The verb is now *aorist* (as 'handled') which may refer to a particular occasion, perhaps the resurrection (cf. Luke 24.39; John 20.26-29) or comprehends the whole period over which they companied with Him as a completed historical reality. Lastly, the apostles '**handled**' Him – the conclusive proof of material reality. 'Handling' suggests exploring with the hands, i.e. to test by handling and, again, may refer to the resurrection (Luke 24.39; John 20.27). Each statement brings Christ nearer and presents a deepening degree of intimacy. It was this experience of the apostles that enabled them to be effective witnesses (v.3). Any effective communication of the gospel of Christ derives from our personal contemplation of Him. Spiritually we must hear, see, inspect and handle Him.

v.2: This verse is in *parenthesis* and explains how the eternal Word of life could be heard, seen and handled as well as further explaining who the Word of life is. **How?** 'The Life', including its moral and spiritual qualities, was manifested through the incarnation – 'the Word was made flesh'. To this astonishing fact the apostles ('we' and 'us') continue to bear *witness* and *proclaim* (hence the writing of this letter). **Who?** Literally, 'the Life, the Eternal'. Eternal life is divine life – a quality of life enjoyed through a personal relationship with the Father. Thus, the Life was 'with' (*pros*, i.e. towards) the Father to all eternity (cp. John 1.1). Eternal life resides *essentially* in the Son, was *manifested* at His incarnation and is *available* to us through faith in Christ (Romans 5.21). **v.3:** Resuming from v.1, John explains the purpose of the apostolic ministry was to 'declare' (as an authoritative envoy) the person they had *seen* and *heard* in order that 'ye also' (i.e. the readers) might experience fellowship with the apostles, God the Father and His Son (in contrast to the *false*, *temporal* fellowship of the false teachers). What could we possibly share in common with deity? **Eternal life!** Note the: *eternity* of the fellowship (pre-dating the commencement of time); *extension* of the fellowship (to the apostles); *expansion* and *evangelism* of the fellowship (to us); *embrace* and *establishment* of the fellowship (through faith); and the *enjoyment* of fellowship which can be marred by sin (Gilliland).

v.4: The testimony of the apostles, as represented by John, has been delivered to us in writing. Thus, whilst the apostles had the privilege of hearing, seeing and handling, we must read. The purpose of the communication is 'that *your* (or 'our', RV) joy may be full'. 'Our joy' may refer to *both* writer and readers. The sequence of thought links *fellowship* to *fullness* of joy, i.e. complete joy depends upon the establishment and enjoyment of true fellowship with the Father and His Son. The apostles' joy comes from knowing that others share in the fellowship they first experienced (cp. 2 John 4), i.e. the witness delivered by the apostles has been effective in the lives of the hearers.

The Message of Light [1.5-10]

v.5: This section presents a threefold test which declares the reality of a person's fellowship with God. These tests are based on the message received *from* Christ as to the character and nature of God as this determines the conditions of fellowship with Him. 'God is light' unfolds his true essence (cf. John 4.24; 1 John 4.8, 16). In the *physical* sphere, light speaks of glory (Psalm 104.1-2); *spiritually*, light is associated with life (Psalm 36.9; John 8.12); *intellectually* with truth (or revelation, Psalm 119.105) and *morally* as a symbol of holiness (Ephesians 5.8-9). There is 'no darkness at all' in God – He is fulness of life, absolute in truth and perfect in holiness. In contrast, pagan deities of Greek and Roman mythology were characterised by cheating, lying and immorality.

v.6: 'If we say' is a matter of profession. These individuals were claiming to be genuine believers (i.e. in fellowship with God) and yet 'walking (practice) in darkness (position)' meaning they had rejected the light of the revelation of God in Christ (cf. Isaiah 50.10-11; John 3.19-21). The *practice* or character (walking) of their whole lives betrayed their *position* (in darkness). They therefore 'lie' in their *profession* and 'do not the truth' in *practice*. **v.7:** In contrast, the genuine believer walks (practice) 'in the light' (position) having believed the revelation of God in Christ. He cannot walk anywhere else. *Leckie: Walking 'in the light' is where every child of God walks. There are no degrees of walking in the light, as if some Christians walk more in the light than others. The child of God walks in the light of God having been revealed in the person of His Son.* Elsewhere, Paul commands believers to 'walk as children of light' for what a person is *positionally* will be evidenced *practically* (Ephesians 5.8-9). Those who walk in the light have fellowship 'one with another' (*allelon*), i.e. the Christian family. The pronoun *allelon* (x7 in 1-2 John) always expresses a human relationship. How can a poor guilty sinner stand in the blazing, glorious light of the presence of God? 'The blood of Jesus Christ His Son *cleanseth* (present active) us from all sin'. *AMS Gooding: I am so glad that the exposure is so penetrating and exhaustive; it gives me the assurance that every single sin is completely searched out, none has been missed.* The value of that precious blood *remains* before God at all times and thus *maintains* us in the place where Divine grace has brought us. This is illustrated by the blood-stained mercy seat in the tabernacle. The blood remained before the eye of God all the year round, allowing God to continue with His people. The cleansing is good for 'all' or 'every' sin. No sin is beyond the cleansing power of the blood of Christ. *Kelly: If not every and all sin, then not any sin.*

v.8: Having claimed fellowship with God, but rejected His revelation, the heretic now claims to be without sin. 'Sin' is *singular* and refers to the evil principle of inherent sin (the root). Only of Christ could it be said 'in Him is no sin' (3.5), yet these individuals claim sin is not active within them. Such a claim is deliberate and continuous self-deception proving they have never accepted the word of God – the truth is not 'in them'. *Lenski: When the truth is not in us we are by no means empty, but are full of fictions, fables, myths, self-made fancies and notions of things that are not so.* **v.9:** In contrast, the believer recognises the continuous activity of the sin principle within, ever seeking confession of the sins it produces that fellowship with God might be enjoyed to the full. 'Confess' is literally 'to speak together' or 'agree with another'. The believer lives in a constant spirit of owning their sins before the Father, confessing them specifically one by one. *MacDonald: We must drag them out into the open before God, call them by their names, take sides with God against them, and forsake them. Yes, true confession involves forsaking of sins.* Cf. Psalm 32.5, Proverbs 28.13.

Upon confession, the Father is faithful (to His promises – Micah 7.18-20; Hebrews 10.23) and just (because of the blood) to grant a Father's *parental* forgiveness in the circle of the family. There is no thought of *judicial* forgiveness here (2.12). God's forgiveness relates to the *conscience* (Hebrews 10.2); the Father's forgiveness concerns the enjoyment of *communion*. God forgives (to 'send away' a debt) the sinful *act* and cleanses (to 'remove a stain') the resultant *state*. The illustration from the tabernacle is the laver. A constant cleansing by the application of the water of the *word of God* in the power of the *Spirit of God* is needed in the life of every believer (John 13.8).

v.10: The third claim of the heretic is that they have *never* committed sins. The *fruit* rather than the *root* (v.8) is now in view. Such a position accuses God of falsehood as His word clearly states that 'all have sinned'. The noun 'liar' is emphatic by position charging God not merely of telling lies, but of *being* a liar as to His character. Such a person denies the *specific* word of God (as opposed to divine truth in *general*, v.8) as a case in point (Numbers 23.19; Titus 1.2).