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A0418 -- May 2, 2004 -- 1 John 1:1-4 -- Eternal Life

I. PROLOGUE: THE CALL TO FELLOWSHIP (1:1-4)

A. SUBJECT: MESSAGE OF LIFE (1:1)

That which was from the beginning, that which we have heard (akouo; Perfect), that which we have seen (oraō; Perfect) with our eyes (ophthalmos), that which we ourselves contemplated (theaomai; Aorist) and our hands had touched (pselaphao; Aorist) concerning the word of life—

“*That which*”, used four times in verse 1, is neuter, so it is very hard to say that it refers to Christ. If it did, then it would say, “He who was from the beginning...”. This is not a mistake; John knows exactly what he wants to communicate. The problem is that people don’t want to hear. They don’t pay very careful attention to John. The vocabulary is simple but the thoughts are profound. John is a very careful thinker and he wants to communicate something about Jesus Christ, that is quite obvious, for ***Jesus Christ is the one who was heard, seen, contemplated, and touched***. But the question is whether the four “*that which*” phrases are referring to the person of Christ *per se* or something else? It turns out that Jesus is NOT the subject being introduced here. We know that when the Greek authors wanted to introduce a subject for discussion, they would use the preposition *peri* “concerning”. Notice the word “concerning” at the end of v. 1. What subject does John want to talk about? John wants to talk about the “word of life”—that is John’s subject. Many translators capitalize the words “Word” and/or “Life” at the end of verse 1. Do you see that? Their reason for capitalizing “Word” is because they start comparing John 1:1 with 1 John 1:1 because some of the words are the same (John 1:1) “In the beginning was the Word...” When they capitalize a word, it means the word is referring to a person. In John 1:1 it is clear that “Word” personifies Jesus Christ, but to transport that idea into John’s epistle is a great interpretive mistake. As anyone who does a word study of the way John uses the term “word” (Gk. *logos*) will find, John almost always uses the term “logos” to mean “message” (65 uses). For example, look down at **1:10; 2:5; 2:7; 2:14; 3:18**. In each use, it makes more sense to understand the term as “message” than it does “Christ”. So, first of all, it should not be capitalized, because “Word” here does not refer to Jesus Christ; it refers to a

“message” about “life”. You should mark “word” out and write in “message” so that it is clearer to you. Second, “Life” is often capitalized as well, and this may be legitimate for two reasons: 1) John amplifies the word “Life” in vs. 2; and 2) because John says Jesus Christ is eternal life in 1 John 5:20 (Deity of Christ verse). You have to get accustomed to the way John thinks. In John’s thinking, Jesus Christ and Eternal Life are hard to distinguish effectively, because they are so intertwined. Jesus Christ is the source of eternal life and we are the recipients of eternal life.

The **message about life** was **“from the beginning”**. The question is what beginning is being referred to in v. 1? The tendency is to immediately think of John’s Gospel 1:1, “In the beginning was the Word...” which is clearly before creation. But that does not fit John’s epistle. He uses the same phrase in **2:7** (READ), 2:24, and 3:11 not for the beginning of creation, but for the beginning of the Christian experience of his readers. Here in 1:1, it refers to the beginning of Christ’s ministry as in Mark 1:1 (READ). So, the **message about life** began at the beginning of Christ’s ministry. The “we” refers to John and the other apostles, they were the ones who were with Jesus from the beginning of His ministry (AD29). So, they were the ones who heard, saw, contemplated and touched Jesus. What John is doing is giving eyewitness testimony of the **message of life in and by Jesus Christ.**

Notice at the end of vs. 1 and 2 you see a dashed line. The translators put that there so you would know that verse 2 is set off. In vs. 2, John is going to elaborate on this subject of “life” so we will have a better idea of what he is talking about.

B. THEME: ETERNAL LIFE (1:2)

and the life was made manifest (*phaneroo*; *Aorist*), **and we have seen** (*orao*; *Perfect*) **and testify** (*martureo*; *Present*) **and report** (*apaggello*; *Present*) **to you the eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest** (*phaneroo*; *Aorist*) **to us—**

In vs. 2, John gives us the theme of the book, which is **“the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us”**. Of course, Jesus is the **“true God and eternal life”** (READ 1 John 5:20). But the apostle wants to stress the realities that concern “eternal life” itself. This “eternal life” is shared by his readers (1 John 5:13 READ). You cannot lose this eternal life, of course, but you can lose the enjoyment of eternal life. So, the question is, why is John making the theme of the book “eternal life” and not Jesus Christ Himself? The short answer is because John wants to show us that we have something in common with Jesus Christ and what we have in common is “eternal life.” The reason John wants to stress the common ground of “eternal life” is because John is warning his readers about some

false teachers that may be coming to deceive them, telling them they don't share "eternal life" with Christ. If the readers are deceived by this false teaching, then they will get out of fellowship. We are going to call these false teachers the Revisionists.

THE REVISIONISTS

John introduces this group of false teachers in 1 John 2:18-20. We are going to call them Revisionists because they didn't ditch all of Christianity, but they *revised* Christianity. Many commentators claim these were Gnostics (agnostic vs. Gnostic) but the earliest Gnostic documents come after the first century and 1 John was written well before the end of the first century (probably 64-65 AD). It may be legitimate to call these false teachers Proto-Gnostics since the teachings are similar to Gnostic teachings; but it is safer to simply refer to them as Revisionists, since all we know for sure about their false doctrine is from what John tells us in 1, 2, and 3 John.

So, who are these Revisionists? READ 1 John 2:18-20. The readers already knew about prophecy and the coming antichrist from Paul's second letter to the Thessalonians (2:1-10) so John can say that "***they heard that antichrist is coming.***" But John warns them of some antichrist's that have already appeared! In John's thinking, an antichrist is anyone who brings the false teaching that Jesus is not the Christ. This is exactly what the Revisionists are teaching according to 1 John 2:22 READ. These antichrists are therefore *precursors* of the ultimate ANTICHRIST of the future. The question here in v. 18-20 is wrapped up in the pronouns "you-they-us". Who are the pronouns "you-they-us" referring to? The easiest explanation is that the "you" is John's readers, the "they" are the Revisionists, and the "us" are the apostles. If this is correct, then these Revisionists were originally a part of the apostles' group in Jerusalem. At some point, ***they went out from*** the apostles group. This is one major reason that we have to date the book around 64-65 AD rather than late like most commentators. This exit of the Revisionists may very well refer back to the Acts 15 incident where the exact same phrase in the Greek (*ek aymon*), "***they went out from us***" is used (15:24). If it does, then this is strong evidence for an early date while John and the other apostles were still in Jerusalem before 70 AD. If so, then these Revisionists would have a strong tie to the original authoritative group of apostles and may use this tie to claim superiority and authority, if given the opportunity to press their doctrines on John's readers. Thus, John is warning his readers that if they are deceived by the strange doctrines of the Revisionists, which are contrary to those they originally heard from the apostolic witnesses, then they will lose their enjoyment of eternal life. John is not saying they will lose eternal life, but that they will lose their enjoyment of eternal life because they will be out of fellowship.

John does not want this to happen. His epistle therefore stresses truths about eternal life which have been revealed *by* and *in* the Lord Jesus. The reaffirmation of these core truths is the key to ongoing fellowship with the apostles and the Father and the Son (verse 3). Today it is often forgotten that the truth of God's word is the basis for all fellowship with God and true fellowship with one another. To the extent that one leaves the original truths which the Lord revealed to the apostolic witnesses by so much will he leave true fellowship with God. For God cannot have fellowship with any form of spiritual darkness (verse 6).

Manifest (phaneroo) is a careful word choice for John (he uses it twice in this verse). There are two ways the “life” can be manifest: historically and presently. *Historically*, the “life” was manifest in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Christ Jesus. That is the sense in which John is using the term in vs. 2. However, in 1 John 4:9-16, John reveals that this “life” can be manifested *presently in and through* believers who possess this “life.” That is the main theme of this epistle. In other words, you as a believer can presently manifest “eternal life” because you share this “eternal life” with Christ. (Remember, His seed abides in you; you have a regenerate nature through which you express this same eternal life).

This “life” can therefore be talked about and discussed because the eyewitness apostles saw it, testified to it, and are now reporting it to the readers. Eternal life is not some ineffable idea. It is a reality that can be discussed. This communication of “life” is now given fuller explanation. This life is the “***eternal life which was with the Father and was made manifest to us***—“. The word “proclaim” would better communicate the idea if translated “report”. John is acting as an eyewitness reporter. The Scriptures are basically a reporting device like a newspaper or magazine (except inerrant). What John is doing is reporting front page news to us. The report is that “***eternal life was made manifest to us***”. The “***us***” refers to John and the apostles. They were the unique group that God selected to reveal this eternal life to. Thus, John and the other apostles are uniquely equipped to report this information to us.

C. PURPOSE # 1: FELLOWSHIP (1:3)

that which we have seen (orao; Perfect) and heard (akouo; Perfect), we report (apaggello; Present) to you, so that you also may have fellowship (koinonia) with us (and our fellowship (koinonia) is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ)

Here John gives the first purpose of the epistle. If the theme is “eternal life,” then the purpose is “fellowship.” John is reporting that because we have believed we share “eternal

life” with Christ and being assured of this truth is the foundation for fellowship. The word fellowship is *koinonia* and means “sharing.” It can refer to the sharing of undertakings, possessions, or experiences. But this is no ordinary “fellowship.” Some might find it hard to believe that it is possible for us today to have fellowship with the apostles who saw, heard, contemplated, and touched the original manifestation of eternal life (vs. 1). One might say, “It is not possible because we are so far removed from the apostles direct contact with this ‘life’”. But interestingly, John thinks that it *is* possible. How then can we have fellowship with them? We can have fellowship with the apostles through the apostolic writings. The writings of the apostles communicate to every generation what was seen and heard so that we are able to share in what was seen and heard by the apostles themselves! Additionally, John makes the stunning claim that to have fellowship with the apostles is to have fellowship with the Father and the Son Jesus Christ! John places fellowship with the apostolic circle on the same plane as fellowship with God. The reason is because the two are so intertwined that to have fellowship with one is to have fellowship with the other. But it is really no more stunning that John’s claim in 4:6 (READ) which affirms apostolic authority.

PROBLEM OF AUTHORITY

The modern world and even the contemporary church, because of the autonomy of unbelief, have ignored apostolic authority. When we talk to modern man about authority it is helpful to note what they mean by “authority.” The greatest non-Christian thinkers have admitted that there is far too much data to cover the whole area of reality by their knowledge. They are willing to admit that there are pieces of data that they themselves do not know about and that others may possess. In everyday life, there is the illustration of the **expert**. A medical doctor, for example, is considered an expert on the human body. He possesses knowledge that we do not possess. The lawyer is considered an expert on the Law because he possesses knowledge about the law that we do not possess. Yet even among medical doctors and lawyers there are those who, by natural ability, extensive research, experience, or dedication to their fields discover things unknown by their fellow experts. Therefore, in every field the lesser minds are bound to submit to the authority of the greater minds. Perhaps you are able to see already the kind of authority that the modern man is able to accept, it must be in accordance with the best of human reason. Such a concept of authority is fully acceptable because quite consistent with the sinner’s autonomy.

On the other hand, the biblical conception of authority, as something that stands above “reason” is wholly unacceptable to the natural man. Any form of authority that does not

violate the principle of the autonomy of the human mind will be readily acceptable to the natural man. What we are saying is that the natural man assumes that he has the final criterion of truth within himself. Every authority that comes to him must pass through the standards within himself and he must operate independently from the authority that speaks. So, when the authority of the word of God comes to the natural man, he immediately submits it to standards located within himself and rejects it because it purports to stand above human reason. This is not to say the Bible is unreasonable. It is just not acceptable to the natural man. He is unable to receive what it says about his condition because it says that he is not able to operate independently from God. And this is precisely what the natural man is trying to create, a world that exists independently of God; a world in which man has absolute freedom from the constraints of God. But such would not be freedom at all even if the natural man could make it come to pass. It would be slavery and despair which is really what unbelievers ultimately experience in this life anyway. Why? Because they are constantly trying to break free from the cause-effect form that God created.

The Divine Institutions are fine examples of men trying to escape the original form God created. For example, the Divine Institution of Marriage. Marriage is the relationship of one man and one woman originally designed to typify Christ and the Church (Eph. 5). The natural man revolts against this Divine Institution by re-defining marriage so he can justify homosexual unions. But if it is okay to have homosexual marriages, then why not polygamous marriages? What's wrong with that? If we are making the rules, if we are really making the rules, then there should be no rules at all and there should be no consequences either, in an impersonal universe. But everyone knows that there are consequences, and if we could really have it our way, we would want to live in a world without consequences. But everyone knows this is impossible. The natural man wants to change the form that God created. But God says, when you do this, when you try to live outside of the form I have created, there are consequences. God made the universe a certain way and to try to undo that inevitably has horrible consequences. So, the natural man's search for a life without God is really no life at all.

Likewise, for the believer, if you are deceived by false teachers, like the Revisionists that would tell you that you do not have "eternal life," then you too would be unable to enjoy the "eternal life" that you share with Christ. All deviations from truth have bad consequences. This is what John does not want to happen to you. He does not want you to doubt whether you have "eternal life." He wants you to know you have eternal life so that you can have an abundant life (John 10:10).

The Christian position is that the apostles' writings carry all the authority of God Himself. Therefore, to refuse to hear the apostles is identical to refusing to hear God Himself. In the same way, to be "out of fellowship" with apostolic thought and practice was to be out of fellowship with the Father and the Son. There is no form of true Christian fellowship outside of the apostolic writings since the New Testament is nothing more than the revealed word of the Lord Jesus Himself to His apostles, which He told them to teach to us.

It is worth noting that of the four words mentioned in v. 1 (i.e., hearing, seeing, contemplating, touching) only two of the four are mentioned in v. 3; namely seeing and hearing. He does not include contemplating and touching. There is some significance to the absence of the latter. In verse 1 and 3, you will notice that "hearing" and "seeing" are in the Perfect tense while the "contemplating" and "touching" of v. 1 are in the Aorist tense. The Perfect tense means an action that started in the past and is ongoing, while the Aorist tense means an action in the past that is not ongoing. The thought of "fellowship" probably underlies this shift from the Perfect to Aorist. The basis for fellowship with the apostles and with the Father and Son is therefore encapsulated in what was seen and heard. It is what was seen and heard that the apostles can pass on. On the other hand, they cannot really pass on what was contemplated or touched since that is no longer possible. Whatever is necessary to have fellowship with God must therefore lie within the parameters of what the apostles saw and heard. You and I must wait until we are in the presence of the Lord to "gaze upon" and "handle" Him! But that is clearly something that we look forward to.

D. PURPOSE # 2: APOSTLE'S JOY

and these we write (grapho), so that our joy may be full.

This brings us to the second purpose of John, the Apostle's joy. John has written the things in vs. 1-3 so that the joy that the apostles now have will remain full (periphrastic). John mentions joy in 2 John and 3 John, as well. In 3 John 4 (READ) he says, "***I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.***" Thus, John, unlike many contemporary churches, connects the believer's doctrine and practice in such a way that only when the two are together does it result in a fullness of joy.

Most churches want to dilute doctrinal differences in hope of finding unity and joy. But John says just the opposite. There is no true fellowship if there is no doctrinal unity. The further doctrine is diluted just so more people can get together, the farther we go from true fellowship. How many times have you heard the phrase, "Doctrinal differences are healthy"? How many doctrinal differences do you think there will be when we are in the

eternal state? None, I can assure you. The apostles taught extremely difficult doctrine and they had doctrinal unity, not just on what we might call fundamentals, but on every doctrine taught in the New Testament. We know this because the writings of the New Testament are completely coherent and have no contradictions. All the apostles agreed. The deeper level of doctrinal unity we have as a fellowship with the apostolic writings will naturally result in a deeper and more intimate fellowship with the apostles and with the Father and the Son as well as one another. Doctrinal agreement with the apostolic writings is what results in so much joy. This is not impossible because Paul prayed in Eph. 3:18 that we might be able to comprehend all that he wrote. John's desire for joy is revelatory of his pastor's heart. There is nothing which brings John more joy than seeing his children nurtured by the truth, changed by the truth, and walking in the truth. If John's letter is to have success his readers must avoid the false doctrine of the Revisionists and cling to that doctrine which they heard from the beginning. This will result in maximum fellowship and joy. It was a serious thing to John for believers to abide in the truth they were first taught because if they didn't, then fellowship was not possible because God is light and in Him is no darkness at all, not even a bit (v. 6).

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