

**THE BOOK OF I JOHN**

Lesson Two

**Basic Apostolic Doctrine and Fellowship**

*“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; (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;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. 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. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: 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. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” I John 1:1-10*

John opens his letter at full speed. He by-passes the normal greetings as seen in II and III John. He does not identify himself or his readers. He is like a shepherd who has spotted a pack of wolves who have attacked his flock and the sheep are confused and know not which way to run. The shepherd runs toward the invaders, inflicting pain and death with his rod of truth and bow of justice. Thus John sets out both to defend his flock and destroy the enemy.

In this first section he touches on a number of key issues relating to basic true Christianity: (1) The person of Jesus Christ, (2) The genuineness of the Christian message, (3) The authority of the apostle’s witness, (4) The nature of God, (5) The seriousness of sin, (6) The purposes of his letter, (7) The love of God, and more.

**The Preface 1:1-4**

*“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; (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;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full."*

John begins his preface with the subject of his entire letter, namely Jesus Christ. Verses 1 - 3 comprise one entire complex sentence in the Greek text. The words **"that which"** refer to an object which is identified as the **"Word of life."** But what is the "Word of life?" There are two possibilities. First, it may refer to the impersonal message of the Gospel. In Colossians 3:16 we read, **"Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. . ."** Also in 1 Timothy 6:3 we read, **"If any man teach otherwise, and consent not to wholesome words, even the words of our Lord Jesus Christ and to the doctrine which is according to godliness; . . ."** The second meaning of the "Word of life" may be personal and refer to the person of Jesus Christ. John uses it this way in John 1:1,2,14 which reads, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. . . And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us. . ."** Bible teachers are divided over John's usage and strong arguments can be presented for both positions.

The expression, **"from the beginning"** is also open to several understandings. One, it may refer to the eternal pre-existence of the person of Christ. Two, it may refer to the beginnings of the Gospel era when Jesus made His appearance in history. A third way in which it is used by John is in reference to when the readers had first heard and believed the Gospel message. Since the message of Christ cannot be separated from the person of Christ, it is best to understand John as using the expressions interchangeable.

John makes much use of the pronoun "we" in these verses in contrast to his readers whom he refers to as "you." Who are the "we?" It is best understood as the first generation of believers, namely the apostles, who had personal contact with Christ. Now, who did the apostles believe Jesus to be? In verse 1 He was the pre-existent Christ - **"was from the beginning."** The verb "was" is in the imperfect tense, meaning an action that has always been ongoing in the past, the present and will continue into the future. In verse 2, John describes the pre-existent Word or Christ as being the eternal life that was with the Father. This is identical with his expression in the Gospel of John where we read again in John 1:1,2, **"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God."** John closes his letter by identifying Jesus Christ as the one true God in whom alone exists eternal life. **"And we know that the Son of God is come, and has given us an understanding, that we may know Him that is true, and we are in Him that is true, even in His Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life."** (1 John 5:20). John affirms the true deity of Christ's person.

---

In verses 1 and 2 he goes on to affirm the true humanity of Christ. He asserts that this eternal being had in history assumed such a real body that His voice could be heard, his features could be seen, and His flesh could be touched or handled. The apostles heard Jesus teach with a human voice. In John 5:24 Jesus spoke, **“He that hears my word, and believes on him that sent me, has everlasting life. . .”** They saw and beheld His glorious body in the Mount of Transfiguration. Peter said in II Peter 1:16-18, **“For we have not followed cunningly devised fables, when we made known unto you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were eye-witnesses of His majesty. For He received from God the Father honor and glory, when there came such a voice to Him from the excellent glory, This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And this voice which came from heaven we heard, when we were with Him in the holy mount.”** They could touch or handle His resurrection body. It was to a group of terrified disciples, who believed they were seeing a spirit, that Jesus said in Luke 24:39, 40, **“Behold My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself: handle Me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones, as you see Me have. And when He had thus spoken, He showed them His hands and His feet.”**

What is John asserting? He is saying that the one eternal, true God, revealed or manifested Himself in a real flesh and bones body. The effect which this had upon the apostles is summarized in the words of doubting Thomas, when he was asked by Jesus to touch His nail-scarred hands and pierced side. Thomas cried out, **“My Lord and my God.”** If Jesus were not God, He should have corrected Thomas right there on the spot. The apostles were convinced that the eternal person of the Son of God resided in the flesh and bones body of Jesus.

In verse 3, John asserts that he had personally seen and heard Jesus Christ and can bear witness of the truth of His person and the words which He taught. The false teachers could not make this claim. To those who were claiming that Jesus Christ simply appeared or seemed to be human (Docetics), John said he had heard, seen and felt Him. To those who said that Jesus was not the divine Christ, John said He was the one who was from the beginning and pre-existed with the eternal Father. In affirming such, John shot down the foundation of his opponents.

The apostolic doctrinal test for who and what is a true Christian lies in the willingness to confess that Jesus Christ is fully God and fully man. Any person who refuses to confess this cannot be embraced as an apostolic Christian. cf. I John 4:2,3: **“Hereby know you the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof you have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.”**

John now proceeds to inform his readers that he had two purposes in mind for telling them this apostolic doctrine. This first purpose was for them to have fellowship with him and with God. And this fellowship is found only in the message concerning God's Son Jesus Christ. The word that John uses (*koinonia*) has the basic meaning of "to share something in common with another." Many churches today promote themselves as places where you can attend and participate in "food, fun, and fellowship." But for John and his readers "fellowship" is something more profound than good food and good times. It involves a commitment to a common body of beliefs relating to Jesus Christ, and faithfulness to a moral life of dedicated obedience. It also involves a social life consisting of a common love for God and for other people, especially fellow believers.

The second purpose for John's letter is stated in verse 4. "That your joy may be full." Joy is not to be equated with the happy thoughtless emotions of party-goers. In John 17:13, Christ spoke of having joy as He was facing the most unhappy occasion of His humiliation leading up to the cross. Christ's joy was an assuring satisfaction that He would accomplish His goal. He saw the travail of His soul and was satisfied. He prayed that His disciples might possess that same joy. John's readers have been shaken by the false teachers who have left the church and stand in need of assurance that what they have believed is the true message of eternal life.

The summary of verses 1 - 4 are set forth in these three points:

1. Jesus Christ was a real person. He was God in the flesh. This apostolic witness was based on firsthand experience.
2. The apostolic witness, when received and believed is the basis for sharing the fellowship of eternal life with the Father, the Son, and all true believers.
3. This sharing of fellowship in eternal life is presently going on in the believer's life and will be perfected in the life to come.

#### **Fellowship With God - 1:5-10**

*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. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: 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 cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us."*

---

Apostolic Christianity not only has a doctrinal standard by which our beliefs can be tested, it also provides a moral standard by which our behavior can be judged. In verse 5 John affirms that **“God is light.”** To speak of God in this manner was to make use of a well-known symbol conveying several facets of meaning. One was that of revelation and illumination. Light illuminates the dark places and symbolizes the way in which God reveals Himself to men to show us how to live. Thus it represents knowledge. The Psalmist can then say, **“Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path.”** (Psalm 119:105). A second use of light is that which describes God’s holiness; light symbolizes the flawless perfection of God’s moral character. God is pure and holy and without sin. The holy angels cover their faces in His presence and cry out **“Holy, Holy, Holy”** (Isaiah 6:3). Again, light is used as a synonym for God’s truth. Psalm 43:3 says, **“O send out thy light and thy truth: let them lead me.”**

When John goes on to say that **“in him is no darkness at all”** he is thinking of light and darkness in ethical terms. Light is a picture of truth, knowledge and righteousness while darkness is a picture of falsehood, ignorance and sin. God is a moral being and cannot tolerate immorality in His moral creatures. He thus says, **“Be ye holy, for I am holy.”** (1 Peter 1:16). The basic Christian message rests upon the foundational premise that if men are to fellowship with God, or have something in common with God, they must walk in His light as revealed in the historical person of His Son Jesus Christ. In essence, those whose fellowship is with the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ, will in their lives reflect the moral character of God.

If God is light, then fellowship with Him is dependent on moral purity. The pre-Gnostic teachers were apparently teaching the opposite. To them, fellowship with God was not related to moral conduct. In verses 6 - 10, John refutes three false claims being made by the false teachers. His use of the pronoun **“we”** now changes its meaning. It no longer refers to John and the apostles but is now being applied to anyone who professes to represent Christianity. John introduces each false claim with the words **“if we say.”** cf. verses 6, 8, 10. He then proceeds to refute each claim. In each of these three teachings, John demonstrates the Christian attitude toward the nature of sin. The three claims which the false teachers were making were:

1. We have fellowship with God - verse 6.
2. We are without sin - verse 8.
3. We have not sinned - verse 10.

The first claim was that it is possible to live in sin and still have fellowship with God (verse 6). John’s reply is that if God is light and there is no darkness in Him, no person can claim to be living in fellowship with God while walking in sin at the same time. Anyone who makes such a claim is lying and is not living by God’s standard of

---

truth. The word “walk” refers to a person’s moral activity. It is a present tense verb. In this tense it refers not to a few isolated acts of sin but to an ongoing habitual lifestyle of walking in the darkness.

In verse 7 John shows what a true believer’s lifestyle is like. They **“walk in the light.”** Their conduct manifests an ongoing conformity to God’s moral standard. Two benefits emerge from such a lifestyle.

- (1) The first benefit is that such people have **“fellowship with one another.”** Who is the “one another?” Some believe it refers to Christians and fellow believers, but it is best to understand it as referring to Christians and God. The fellowship which John has addressed is between God and believers as seen back in verse 6.
- (2) The second benefit of walking in light is that the blood of Christ cleanses us from all sin. The “blood” of Christ is a symbolical way of speaking of the death of Christ. Leviticus 17:11 says, **“For the life of the flesh is in the blood: and I have given it to you upon the altar to make an atonement for your souls for it is the blood that makes an atonement for the soul.”** In the Old Testament the blood was the result of the death of the sacrificial victim, and its application to the person offering the sacrifice indicated that the effects of the sacrifice applied to him. The effects were the removal and forgiveness of his sin. The expression “all sin” refers to every kind of sin and shows there is no limit to the types of sin that Christ is able and willing to forgive. His death makes all kinds of sins forgivable. Thus a true Christian cannot live a lifestyle of habitual sin. The Christian’s life is one of moral purity that enables fellowship with God to occur through the cleansing of sin by the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son. John’s teaching on the blood flies right in the face of the Cerinthian Gnostics who denied that the divine Christ actually died on the cross.

The second false claim is addressed in verses 8 and 9. The claim is “we have no sin.” This claim moves a step further from the truth. To claim that one may live in sin and this does not affect your fellowship, is one thing, but to claim that you have no sin is quite another. In this, John is addressing another type of the Gnostic error. The word “sin” is in the singular and probably refers to a denial of the principle of sin residing in fallen human nature. The false teachers may have been claiming that through the special knowledge they had received they had been cured of their sinful natures. Or they may have been saying that though they sinned in their bodies, their flesh had nothing to do with their spirits. They communed or fellowshiped with God through their spirit, not their bodies. In either case, they were boldly saying they were not sinful, thus allowing them to fellowship with God.

It was self-evident to John that these men were sinners and were deceiving themselves in their beliefs, and were strangers to the saving grace of God in Christ Jesus. No matter what a person claims, a true Christian

---

cannot or will not deny his or her sinful nature. So just how does true Christianity handle the sin question? Not by denying, but by confessing it. The word confess comes from two Greek words which mean “to speak the same thing.” It carries the idea of “agreeing with or admitting to.” To confess our sins, means we are to say the same thing about our sin as God says. In confession we agree with God that our sin is wrong. Confession not only admits sins but seeks their removal and forgiveness. Proverbs 28:13 says, **“He that covers his sins shall not prosper: but whoso confesses and forsakes them shall have mercy.”** The false teachers were denying their sinfulness, while the true Christians were confessing their sins. To deny one’s sinfulness means the truth is not in us. In contrast, to confess one’s sinfulness is to give evidence of having the truth in us.

God has promised to forgive sin upon our repentance. To this promise, He is both faithful and just. Micah 7:18-20 describes the forgiveness of God. **“Who is a God like unto Thee, that pardons iniquity and passes by the transgression of the remnant of His heritage? He retains not His anger forever, because He delights in mercy. He will turn again, He will have compassion upon us; He will subdue our iniquities; and Thou wilt cast all their sins into the depths of the sea. Thou wilt perform the truth to Jacob, and the mercy to Abraham, which Thou hast sworn unto our fathers from the days of old.”** What does it mean to say God is just to forgive us our sins? It is not just for a holy God to allow sin to be removed and the sinner to be released. Justice requires that the acts committed receive the punishment they deserve. It is at this point the doctrines of grace enter the picture. Jesus took the punishment for our sins. Forgiveness is therefore just because Jesus shed His blood as the just one in the place of the unjust ones. God can faithfully promise forgiveness because He has a just basis upon which to forgive.

In verse 10, John pronounces his conclusion upon the spiritual state of the apostate teachers. The third claim of the teachers is the most blatant of all. In verse 6, we have seen that one group of the false teachers were saying that one’s moral conduct had nothing to do with one’s fellowship with God. Then in verse 8, another group was saying that sin was not a part of one’s human nature. They denied the fall of man. But in verse 10, another group had advanced in their apostasy to the point they were saying that the specially enlightened ones had never sinned so as to stand in need of an atoning sacrifice to restore them to God’s fellowship. The expression, **“we have not sinned”** translates a Greek verb in the perfect tense. This describes an action that occurs in the past of which the effects continue to exist in the present. John uses this type of verb to describe a person claiming to be in a condition of having never committed a sinful act in the past or in the present.

John says this type of person is calling God a liar and identifies himself as a stranger to the word of truth. He cannot be a Christian in any sense of the word. God has spoken, and He has declared that all people have sinned. Paul says in Romans 3:10, **“There is none righteous, no not one,”** and in 3:23, **“For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”** To deny what God has said, to deny what one is and has been, is to place

oneself beyond the effectual solution which God provides for sin. This is final apostasy and is described by John as the “*sin unto death*” in I John 5:16. It is also described by the writer of Hebrews in several forceful expressions. The entire gospel message rests upon the fact that mankind is sinful and needs a Savior.

Thus in his opening, John has affirmed that apostolic Christianity rests upon the doctrinal foundation, that fellowship with God entails a proper confession of Jesus Christ, as perfect God and perfect man, who shed His blood to make atonement for sins. The practical moral experience of Christians is to seek to avoid sin, and if they fail to do so, they are to confess their sins, and avail themselves of the cleansing process found in Christ’s righteousness. Any person or teaching which claims to be Christian and fails to confess these principles, is to be viewed as a parasite which has attached itself to the identity of Christianity, but has no life of its own.

The church of Jesus Christ is “***built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone.***” (Ephesians 2:20). If we should desire to obtain and maintain eternal life in fellowship with God, let us model what is said of those who were converted on the day of Pentecost in Acts 2:42, “***they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship.***”