

The Word of Life I John 1:1-4

Today we start a study of I John. John the son of Zebedee, a fisherman is believed to be the author. I John is not a traditional letter – like Paul’s epistles. Unlike many New Testament books, the author doesn’t tell us who he is. But early church leaders identify that John wrote this book as well as the Gospel of John and Revelations. John is labeled the disciple who Jesus loved.

The style of I John is similar to the Gospel of John. They were written in simple Greek and use contrasting imagery like dark and light, life and death, truth and lies, and love and hate. It seems the author is Jewish, with Aramaic as his mother tongue, who learned flawless Koine Greek. But he retained a Semitic feel for language. The message of the book is simple and profound, even though the themes are repeated. The text meanders, and it’s difficult to find a lot of linear, A to B to C, thinking and logic.

The claim to be an eyewitness of Jesus should catch our attention. There seems to be indications of a close relationship with Jesus. The possible date of the writing of I John is between 85 and 95 AD.

It’s pretty clear the letter is addressed to believers, but the letter itself does not tell us who they were or where they lived. This was probably a circular letter, sent to a number of Christians, instead of one particular congregation. It’s suspected that this letter went to the churches around Ephesus in today’s Turkey, because John ministered in various churches in that area.

As we look at I John, and have some idea of the issues the early church struggled with, we get an idea of why John wrote this letter. John’s readers were confronted with an early form of Gnostic heresy, alternative facts, that

basically proclaims, the spirit is entirely good and all matter is entirely evil. This means: First, the human body, which is matter, is evil. God, who is Spirit is good.

Second, Salvation is the escape from the body. But it is achieved, not by faith in Jesus, but by special knowledge. And of course this gives extra power to those who control the knowledge.

Third, Gnosticism denies Christ’s true humanity in two ways. The first takes us to the heresy, called Docetism, which teaches that Jesus only seemed to have a human body. And the second, some in the church taught that the divine Christ joined the man Jesus at baptism & left him before he died. This heresy has the name, Cerinthianism, after a man named, Cerinthus.

The result of Gnosticism is that since the body is considered evil, people treated their bodies harshly. They fasted, were celibate, had rigid control over their bodies, even treated themselves badly. And knowledge became all important, but morality less so.

A second result of Gnosticism thinking is, it led to licentiousness, debauchery, wastefulness, depravity, immorality, and so on. The logic goes like this. Since matter, the body, is considered evil, breaking God’s laws has no spiritual consequence, because it doesn’t affect the spiritual. So they indulge the body because knowledge is most important.

So you can see why this early form of Gnosticism was a threat to real Christianity. Many of the New Testament books react to this heresy. I John was written to first, expose false teachers, and second, to give believers assurance of salvation. It should not surprise us that John specifically points out the total lack of morality of these

teachers and gave eyewitness testimony to the incarnation of Jesus.

The dangers of Gnosticism are still with us today. It's not proper Christian theology. It's like Christians who say: "O yes, I am a Christian but it doesn't have any influence on how I live my life." That's Gnosticism. It can be a form of seduction from within the church. It often comes from people who think they are improving the Christian faith, who want to make it intellectually respectable, and also enjoy all that life has to offer, even if it's evil and selfish.

So John begins his book by saying he has heard Christ, seen Jesus, and touched Jesus. He's establishing his credentials. He's offering up a little thunder – as he and his brother James were called The Sons of Thunder by Jesus. He's saying, "I'm a first hand witness about Jesus & His teachings. Jesus in the flesh was real on this earth. So you liars, antichrists, children of the devil, & blind, stop teaching & believing heresies!

John right out of the gate in this book seems to be thinking of the Docetists who were so spiritually minded that they insisted Jesus never at any time had a flesh and blood body, but was only a phantom in human form. They refused to believe that God would ever demean himself by taking human flesh and blood upon himself. But John insists he heard and saw and touched the Jesus who was fully human. He is saying that it's dangerous to even think or doubt that Jesus was a real man with flesh.

John says, Jesus is from the beginning of time, and through Him eternal God has entered the world. Second, it was a real entry, in a human physical body. And third, that action has given all humans life – God's life. And it came from the Word

of Life – which is a New Testament term referring to Jesus, God's Good News for us.

So John gets right into the issues back then & for us today. He answers these questions: What does a Christian look like? What does it mean to be a Christian? How can we tell a real Christian from someone who is only a professing Christian? How do we go about getting assurance that we are in Christ, that we have a saving relationship with Jesus?

John was writing to Christians who were troubled by false teachers. He addressed the teaching of these false prophets that were producing various kinds of effects in the church. The false teachers had produced the attitudes and the idea that doctrine was not that important. One of their mottos would have been, "Doctrine divides but experience unites." And so their teaching, that was different from that of the Apostles, would have produced the idea that it wasn't really that important what we believed about Jesus as long as we profess that name and we proclaim to be Christians.

Many of the false teachers were suggesting that we need to rethink what the church was teaching about Jesus, and John wrote to address that particular aspect. Many of these false teachers were suggesting that there were other ways to true knowledge of God other than through Jesus. They were introducing new teachings about spiritual experiences. They would say, "Unless you understand this secret, which even the Apostles didn't know, but which has been revealed to me by the Holy Spirit, you can't live the fullness of the Christian life. But once you understand my secret, then you can find true fullness and joy."

These false teachers were discounting self-denying love; they were discounting world-

denying godliness; and they were discounting Christ exalting faith. To say it another way, they down played Jesus' call to deny self, Jesus' concern about ethics, and belief in Jesus sent by Almighty God to teach, die for our sins and be raised from the dead. John wrote to refute false teachings. He wrote to encourage maturity in the faith and in the certainty of hope and joy.

Did the early Christian church take these heresies about Jesus Christ more seriously than many followers of Jesus do today? It's important to notice that in just a few short years after Jesus went to heaven, heresies became part of church teaching. Theologians developed different ideas about Jesus. Absolute truths were giving way to new ideas and relativism. The understanding of Christian spirituality was under attack and the idea that there is only one way of salvation was considered outmoded, backwards, narrow, & ignorant. Sounds like today doesn't it?

Polls tell us that something like 60% of self-identified evangelical Christians don't believe in absolute truth. [Eric Metaxas remarked](#) that if Americans took a theology exam, their only hope of passing would be if God graded on a curve. All research shows that in knowing both the content of the Bible and the doctrinal foundations of Christianity, Americans are below the bottom of the class. Startling percentages of people embrace ancient errors condemned by all major Christian traditions. These are core doctrines that define Christianity itself.

The scene in Canada isn't much better. One poll says that the word religion is like a four letter word to a sizable number of citizens. The idea of evangelism and theology make a lot of people uncomfortable. When it comes to moral attitudes, people are fairly mudd

about them. That's the survey's term. Around half the respondents claim they believe in moral relativism.

So we have our work cut out for us. Can our gospel proclamation work in that kind of environment? The answer is. "Yes, it already has and it will." It worked back then & works today. Pluralism & relativism were the dominant ways of the day and the gospel impacted the world of John's time.

John wrote to Christians that were living in just as uncertain and just as changing a time as we are living in. He said to them, "Look, I know that you are unsettled in your confidence in the gospel because of this ever-changing world and the concerns around truth. I know that you are confused when you hear people say things different about Jesus than I taught you. I know that you are unsettled when they say that there are other ways to true knowledge of God other than through a faith relationship with Jesus."

So John lays out his goals for writing in these four verses. First: He wants people to be in fellowship with each other and with God. The Christian message is summed up as having two great aims – love for others and love for God.

Second: It is John's wish to bring people joy. The ultimate note of the Christian message is joy. And third: To accomplish the first two goals, John's aim is to set Jesus Christ's incarnation in front of us.

The simple fact is that if we are ever to find fellowship with one another and fellowship with Almighty Creator God, and if we are to ever find true joy, we must find them in Jesus Christ, who came to earth as fully human, to show us how to live, who died for our sins, rose again, & will return some day. Doctrine and true facts are important.