

Study 2: 1st John Chapter 1

Introduction

Gnostic ideas underlie John's letters, and he begins by establishing the credibility of his witness, and that of the other apostles. Engaging with God (through Jesus) is the key from which all other things follow. We cannot continue to live our lives engaging in worldly sinful practices whilst we claim to belong to God. The two are as incompatible as day and night.

Body of the Study

Introduction

Fellowship with God

Dealing with Sin

Homework and preparation for next week:

Read the notes as a review of the study

Read chapter 2 in preparation for the next study

What things come to mind when you think of fellowship with others?

What are some of the barriers that inhibit the strengthening and deepening of our fellowship with other brethren?

What things can you do that will help break down these barriers?

Notes for study 2: 1st John Chapter 1

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Introduction

In response to the Gnostic philosophy of having some sort of *special knowledge*, John reminds the readers that the apostles have *genuine knowledge* – first hand knowledge – of Jesus. “...*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched--this we proclaim concerning the Word of life.* ² *The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us.* ³ *We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.* ⁴ *We write this to make our joy complete...*” (1:1:1-4 NIV).

John makes four claims that attest to the genuineness of what he says, with three of them providing witness collaboration (heard; seen; and touched):

- **It was from the beginning.** The Gnostic doctrine had come along later. The Christians were struggling with and being challenged for, holding to the original truth – *the faith which was delivered to them* – but was being called into question by the Gnostics. John claims that his evidence goes back to that original truth.
- **We (the apostles) have heard it.** They had been with Jesus and had heard His teaching. Jesus spent three years with them and then empowered them with the Holy Spirit who would guide them into all of the truth (Jn 16:13).
- **We have seen it with our eyes (and have looked upon it).** Not only had the apostles heard Jesus teaching, but they had also observed – *seen* – how He acted in various situations. Jesus was the master of every situation. Whilst others sought to do evil, Jesus sought to do good. Whilst others sought to do evil to Him, He reacted in ways that no human would have. They saw His unjust persecution, they saw His trumped up (and illegal) trials, and they saw His painful death on the cross. They saw the earthquakes, they saw the sun darkened, and they saw the bodies of the dead come forth from the graves (Mt 27:51-53). And finally, they saw the empty tomb (Jn 20:1-9) and the resurrected Jesus (Jn 20: 19-21).
- **We have touched it.** Jesus' resurrection was not an apparition (something that had an appearance, but no substance). Jesus breathed on them (Jn 20:22-23), and later ate with the disciples (Lk 24: 42-43). Thomas (“*doubting Thomas*”) did not believe the testimony of the other disciples, but wanted the assurance of physical contact. Jesus offered the wounds for Thomas to examine (Jn 20: 27-29).

There is a strong parallel between what John writes here and his gospel “...*In the beginning was the word ... and the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory...*” (Jn 1:1;14 NKJV). John has established that his testimony is true and credible, and writes “...*We declare this to you ... so that you may have fellowship with us...*” (1:1:3). This is in contrast to the Gnostics, who were teaching that the original message was incomplete, and they denied the humanity (bodily incarnation) of the Messiah.

Fellowship with God

After introducing his credentials, John presents the key to the message to be delivered “...*This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all...*” (1:1:5 NIV). Again, this is exactly consistent with the symbolism used in the fourth gospel (Jn 1:4-5; 9). John uses several descriptions for God, which emphasise His nature:

- God is light (1:1:5)
- God is Spirit (Jn 4:24)
- God is love (1:4:8)

He sets the scene for the things that will follow in the discourse. Describing God as light has illusions to the Old Testament Psalms “...*In your light we see light...*” (Ps 36:9); “...*The LORD is my light and my salvation...*” (Ps 27:1). Jesus said “...I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life...” (Jn 8:12). The idea of walking in the light is that of having fellowship with God, and *progressing* in our relationship with Him.

Darkness is not an entity itself, but rather the absence of light. Darkness and light cannot co-exist (OK – the physicists will tell me that a black hole is so intense that not even light can escape from it, and therefore light and darkness both exist together! But in our worldly and practical example, our experience is as I’ve said.) If we want to make a room dark, we have to exclude the light. We can’t go outside and flick a switch to turn on the dark – but we can go out at night and flick a switch to turn on the light! Light is energy, and spiritually God is the source of all energy.

John takes us to the next step “...*If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth...*” (1:1:6 NKJV). Like our example, we cannot be in fellowship with God if we are not engaged in a relationship with Him. And to be in a relationship where He is absent (in darkness) puts us at odds with our claim. Paul calls us to get away from these things “...*and have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather expose them...*” (Eph 5:11).

Taking this back to the Gnostic situation that John is addressing, the Gnostics claimed enlightenment, and did not consider themselves to be part of darkness at all. However, John’s point is that they are deluded and the things that they do and teach clearly identify that they are not in fellowship with God, and therefore they must be in darkness.

It must not be assumed that the opponents agreed with the author's claim that they walked in darkness. Far from it! They claimed to walk in the light while they practiced the deeds of darkness. This is what made their actions so pernicious. Inevitably they began to call their "darkness" light and to claim righteousness without doing righteousness. In such situations, the author says, we lie and do not live by the truth. (NIVBC).

In direct contrast, he instructs us to *walk in the light*, which is to say that we must remain in God’s fellowship without compromise. “...*But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin...*” (1:1:7 NKJV). There is a strong message here to the church – that *walking in the light* is the key to fellowship. Of course, we can’t be in fellowship with God and participate in sinful practices (the *works of darkness*). But neither can we have fellowship with each other. An obvious observation is that to have fellowship we need to have things in common – and in the church, the thing that we have in common is our common salvation, and the fact that none of us deserve the great gift of God’s grace.

The word for fellowship is *koinonia* which is also translated *contribution* (Rom 15:26); *communion* (1 Cor 10:16); *distribution* (2 Cor 9:13); *communication* (Phm 1:5). The idea of fellowship in the New Testament is not a superficial social interaction, but a deep participation with our fellow Christians as we walk the Christian life together, and help each other along the journey.

Dealing with Sin

John says that our salvation is conditional upon us *walking in the light*. Paul says as much in the first Corinthian letter “...*Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders* ¹⁰ *nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God.* ¹¹ *And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God...*” (1 Cor 6:9-11 NIV). We cannot continue to live a life of sin, and claim to be God’s people – it’s just darkness claiming to co-exist with light! Paul points out that as christians, we have changed, because we have been redeemed by Jesus.

A natural conclusion (and one held by many christians) is that therefore in order to be right with God, we must live a perfect life. But that is impossible, and we continue to stumble and fall to sin. John says that “...*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us...*” (1:1:8 NKJV). Paul describes his battle with sin in Rom 7:18-25. We cannot do this on our own – our only hope is God’s mercy (not inflicting on us the punishment that we deserve). John gives us the remedy for this situation “...*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness...*” (1:1:9 NIV).

It must be noted that John is writing to christians – to those who have *repented* of their sins (Acts 2:38) and have been *baptised into Jesus Christ and put on Christ* (Gal 3:27). The passage is not describing what we must do to *become* christians, but what we *as christians* must do when we sin. Even though we feel bad because we have sinned (and we ought to feel bad about it!) we need have no doubt about God’s forgiveness and the state of our salvation because *He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness*. As christians, our place in God’s family is secure – but it is conditional! We must acknowledge our sins! And with that acknowledgment is acknowledgment of our dependence on Him.

Conversely, we cannot deny that we sin “...*If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us...*” (1:1:10 NKJV). Paul summed it up in Romans “...*For all have sinned and fall short of God’s glory...*” (Rom 3:23); and “...*there is none righteous, no not even one...*” (Rom 3:10).