

CHAPTER ONE

The Word of Life

(1 John 1:1-4)

- I. The Apostolic Proclamation (1:1-3)
 - 1. The substance of the proclamation (1-3a)
 - (1) His pre-existent glory
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First John has no epistolary introduction such as we find in most New Testament letters. This suggests that it is not as much a letter as an informal homily. Its tone is that of a pastor addressing his congregation.

The book opens with a prologue which, in some respects, is reminiscent of the first eighteen verses of the gospel of John. There are striking parallels in phrasing (e.g., "That which was from the beginning," "In the beginning was the Word") and in the use of characteristic words (e.g. "Word," "life," "witness"). Moreover, the two passages are concerned with the same central figure, namely, Jesus as the Word of God.

There is, however, a difference in emphasis. The prologue to the gospel emphasizes the eternal nature of the Word, His deity, and His agency in creation, as background for the assertion that "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). The epistle, on the other hand, acknowledges the deity of the Word but puts stress on His real humanity.

The prologue to the epistle is not as long nor as profound nor as majestic as the prologue to the gospel, but it is nonetheless a statement of great weight and power. Some see it as the pivotal statement on which the whole epistle is built.

This introductory paragraph may be divided into two parts. Verses 1-3 are a general description of the apostolic proclamation; verse 4 sets forth the purpose of this epistle.

I. THE APOSTOLIC PROCLAMATION (1:1-3)

In the Greek text, as well as in most of the English translations, the first three verses constitute one long, complicated sentence.¹ Sawtelle says, "The apostle has so much to crowd into his opening sentence that he seems scarcely to know how to begin" (p. 5). Every word is freighted with meaning.

If we are to follow the train of thought, it is essential that we understand the *structure* of the sentence. Three things are to be observed: First, the *main verb* ("declare") is found in verse 3. The object of this verb is expressed by four relative clauses which, for the sake of emphasis, are placed at the beginning of the sentence in verse 1. The essential statement therefore is as follows: "We declare to you that which was from the beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we beheld and our hands handled concerning the Word of life."²

The declaration summarized in these verses is taken by many to be a sort of recapitulation of the gospel of John. This idea is particularly attractive if we assume, as many do, that I John was written as a covering letter for the gospel and dispatched simultaneously with it. Others prefer to think of the declaration mentioned here as more general; that is, as a summary of the total apostolic proclamation, oral and written.

Second, all of verse 2 is a *parenthesis*. It explains how the declaration set out in verse 1 is possible. Two matters are emphasized: (1) "the life" with which that declaration is concerned has been historically manifested. (2) John's own personal experience confirmed it: "We have seen it, and bear witness."

Third, the words placed at the beginning of verse 3 ("that which we have seen and heard") are *resumptive*. That is to say, they pick

¹George G. Findlay's analysis of these verses is different and quite suggestive. He takes the opening phrase ("that which was from the beginning") to be complete in itself and accordingly places a period at the end of the phrase. Another period is put at the end of verse 1 and the whole of the verse is read as a sort of title to the epistle. Moreover, by construing verse 1 in this fashion, Findlay is able to remove the parentheses from verse 2. He sees that verse not "as an eddy in the current" but rather as "the centre of the passage" (pp. 83-84).

²The phrase "concerning the word of life" (ASV) may be construed in any one of several ways: as a sort of resume of the four preceding clauses and standing in apposition with them — "all that concerns the word of life"; as a modifier of "have heard" (and loosely all the verbs following "have heard"); or as a modifier of "declare" (verse 3).

up anew and repeat in part the statement begun in verse 1. After the long parenthesis of verse 2, John felt that clarity of thought made it appropriate for him thus to repeat himself.

Having considered the structure of verses 1-3, it is now necessary to consider in greater detail what is taught in these verses about the apostolic proclamation. Two matters are presented: (1) the substance of the proclamation (verses 1-3a) and (2) the purpose of it (verse 3b).

1. *The substance of the proclamation* (verses 1-3a). The heart of the apostolic announcement is found in the expression *the Word of life* (verse 1). There are two lines of interpretation. First, there are those (e.g. Westcott, Findlay, Brooke, Dodd, Barclay) who interpret the expression as being impersonal. These take "Word" to mean something like "account" or "preaching" or "announcement" or as Westcott puts it, the "whole message from God to man." "Life" is construed as an objective genitive. Thus, in this interpretation, the "Word of life" is the revelation or announcement of life. "It is," in Findlay's words, "synonymous with 'the Gospel,' the message of the new life which those bear witness to and report who have first 'heard' it and proved its life-giving power" (p. 83). (Compare John 6:68; Phil. 2:16.)

The use of the neuter relative pronoun (translated "that which" in verse 1) gives some support to this view. Another matter which seems to lend strength to this interpretation is the fact that the stress of the phrase is on "life" rather than on "Word." Immediately after mentioning the "Word of life" John continues by saying, "For the life was manifested" (verse 2).

The other interpretation sees "the Word of life" as personal, that is, as a reference to the Son of God who is the revelation or expression of God to man. (Note the use of a capital letter in KJV and ASV, "the Word.") This is the interpretation of Calvin, Alford, Plummer, Law, Conner, Ross, and many others. Those who hold this view refer to John's use of "Word" as a name for Christ in the opening verses of his gospel and the similar use of the term in Revelation 19:13. On the whole it seems the better way of looking at the matter.

In this interpretation "life" may be taken as a descriptive (attributive) genitive ("the living Word," "the life-giving Word") or as an appositional genitive ("the Word who is the life").

What is proclaimed about the Word of life may be summarized as follows:

(1) *His pre-existent glory*. Some interpreters who explain

"Word of life" as a reference to the gospel take *that which was from the beginning* (verse 1a) as a statement designed simply to remove all thought of novelty in the apostolic announcement. It was, they aver, the writer's way of saying that what he has to announce about the Word of life is no new discovery.

"The beginning" in this approach may be understood as a reference to creation, the beginning of history, or to the Incarnation, the beginning of the gospel age. There is, however, more to John's words than this interpretation permits. "From the beginning" is to be understood as practically equivalent to "from eternity." The wording, to be sure, is not identical with John 1:1, but the idea seems to be essentially the same in the two passages. In light of this, "that which was from the beginning" should be seen as a reference to something about the Word (Christ) which antedates time. Calvin takes it to be "the divinity of Christ" (p. 158). Alford explains the whole statement to mean Christ's "eternal pre-existence and inherent Life and Glory with the Father" (p. 1694).

The neuter ("that which") rather than the masculine ("him who") is used because the declaration was not simply of the person of Christ but of all that relates to Him. Paul writes similarly in I Corinthians 15:10: "By the grace of God I am *what* I am."

"Was" translates a Greek imperfect tense and suggests what always has been. Christ the Word did not come to be at some point in time; He already was when time began. He "was" before He "was manifested" (cf. John 1:1, 14).

(2) *His real humanity*: "That which we have heard . . . seen . . . beheld . . . handled, concerning the Word of life . . . declare we unto you" (verses 1b-3a, ASV). This statement serves a dual purpose. For one thing, by an impressive accumulation of words, it affirms and emphasizes the real humanity of Christ. This emphasis on His physical tangibility was doubtless directed against the reckless and unfounded claims of the Gnostics. These heretical teachers combined pagan philosophy and superstition with just enough Christianity to make their system especially dangerous. They denied a real Incarnation, some of them teaching that Jesus was merely a phantom, that He seemed to be a man but was not really a man. John, on the other hand, teaches that in Jesus the eternal God actually clothed Himself in human flesh and made Himself real to men through their senses. John and others heard Him speak, saw Him with their eyes, touched Him with their hands. In John's thinking God came all the way down to us. He took our nature; He became a man of flesh and blood.

Moreover, these words show that the first preachers of the Gospel were reliable and authoritative witnesses of the truth which they proclaimed. Indeed, this emphasis pervades the entire sentence which makes up the first three verses. Three times the writer asserts "we have seen"; twice he writes "we have heard"; and twice he declares that the life "was manifested." John's readers, who belonged to a later generation and had never seen Jesus, might have had questions about the apostolic message. The apostle takes great pains to assure them that he and his fellow apostles were competent witnesses and that what they proclaimed was trustworthy and true. He seems to struggle for words strong enough to express his feelings. "I tell you," he says, "we saw these things with our own eyes, we heard them with our own ears, we have touched and tested them at every point, and we know beyond any doubt that they are so."

Before leaving the first verse attention should be called to the significance of its verbs. "Was," as noted above, translates a Greek imperfect tense and may suggest what always has been. The verbs translated "we have heard" and "we have seen" are both perfect tenses. They point up the abiding reality of the audible and visible experiences of the apostle which may have occurred frequently. What was seen and heard during the days of Christ's earthly ministry left an abiding impression on him. "With our eyes" are words added to the verb "have seen" to emphasize that the experience was actual.

The verbs translated "we beheld" and "our hands handled" introduce a sudden change in tense. In the Greek both are in the aorist tense, possibly referring to a single act (in contrast with the oft-repeated acts of the two preceding verbs). Some interpreters think they refer to some special occasion when John and his fellow apostles had the experience described here. Specifically, the allusion may be to a time when they looked upon and handled the glorified body of the risen Christ (cf. Luke 24:39; John 20:27). Others doubt that the statement can legitimately be confined to a post-resurrection experience.

"We beheld" translates a word which speaks of an intent, contemplative gaze. Barclay says it means "to gaze at someone, or something, until a long look has grasped something of the meaning and significance of that person or thing" (p. 27). In earlier Greek usage it suggested looking with a sense of wonder, but by New Testament times the word had lost this significance. John uses it in the prologue to his gospel when he writes of Jesus, "We beheld his glory" (John 1:14). Jesus used it when addressing the multitudes about John the Baptist: "What went ye out into the wilderness to behold?"

(Luke 7:24, ASV). In the epistle John uses it in two other places, 4:12 and 14.

"Handled," according to Findlay, "denoted not the bare *handling*, but the exploring use of the hands that *tests by handling*" (p. 85). It is found elsewhere in the New Testament only in Luke 24:39 ("handle"); Acts 17:27 ("feel after"); and Hebrews 12:18 ("touched"). In Genesis 27:12 the Septuagint uses it of the fumbling of a blind man. In Deuteronomy 28:29; Job 5:14; and 12:25 it is used of groping in the dark. Ross comments: "Now that the Eternal Logos has been manifested, we no longer fumble in the dark, feeling after God; in Christ we have grasped hold of reality" (p. 135).

(3) *His manifested life*. Verse 2, a parenthesis, explains how it was possible for men to see, hear, and handle the eternal Word. It was because the Word (Christ) in His character as the life, became visible: *For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us* (verse 2). These words are spoken of "the life," but the context suggests that the "life" and the "Word" are one. This is borne out by the similar statement in John 1:4: "In him [i.e., the Word] was life; and the life was the light of men." (See also I John 5:20 ["... and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God, and eternal life"]; and John 14:6 ["I am ... the life"]). "Life," then, like "Word" in verse 1, is a name for Christ.³

The key word is "manifested," used twice in this verse. A term of frequent occurrence in the New Testament, it is employed most often of God or Christ, or of men in relation to God and Christ. Westcott calls attention to its use in John's writings of Christ's first coming (I John 3:5, 8; John 1:31), of His revelation after the Resurrection (John 21:1, 14), and of His Second Coming (I John 2:28). Essentially it means "to bring to light," "to make known that which already exists." Thus the life which always existed in the divine Word was in Jesus made tangible and visible. The verse begins with an unqualified declaration of this fact. The last part of the verse repeats the idea with one addition: the Life was manifested "unto us."

The thought expressed by "manifested" corresponds with "the

³Calvin, who explains "Word of life" to mean "life-giving Word," prefers to interpret "life" here not as a personal name for Christ but as a reference to the life which is offered us in Christ.