

1 John 1:1-2:2

It is reasonable to expect the author of 1 John is the Apostle, writing near the end of the first century. He is concerned about the church's understanding of the gospel, amidst false teaching and self-deception.

During the time this letter was written it was hard to be a Christian, believers were being excluded from Jewish gatherings and in the minority in their cities. The Ephesians had expelled false teachers, and looked like a church, in reality they had lost their love for Christ, at Pergamum and Thyatira there was more trouble, some had returned to the synagogue by denying Jesus (1 John 2:19, 22; 4:2-3; Revelation 2:2-4; 2:14-15, 20-23).

John argues that in the face of ongoing hardship a genuine relationship with the real Jesus in faith and practice was needed, wants them to live a godly life, free of sin. However, he knows sin is persistent, and directs them to their Saviour for healing and forgiveness.

The incarnation

John is speaking to those who have stayed faithful. Echoing the Fourth Gospel he reiterates his personal testimony as a witness of Jesus the Word of life, Jesus the man (John 1:1-18).

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. 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. 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 (1 John 1:1-3).

For John truth and life are not philosophical ideas but embodied reality. Jesus is not the proponent of a way of thinking, nor a recent 'manifestation' from the Greco-Roman pantheon, or God dressed up a flesh and bone coat. He is truly human and truly divine, he dwelt with God before creation and walked on earth in the first century with fishermen; he is the bearer of life, the one who brings fellowship. A right understanding of Jesus informs our life and keeps us from hypocrisy and deception.

Embracing the historical Jesus attested in the Scriptures, staying aligned with this Jesus and continuing to bear witness to our experience of him in the present is central to our life and community as well.

Three claims

John uses imagery of light and darkness to distinguish Christian truth from what was floating around. He disputes three claims, exposing their deception and presents three solutions. First he asserts that true fellowship with God, without the evidence of a godly life is inconsistent with authentic Christianity.

God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth (1John1:5-6).

What does it mean to be a Christian? Our identity is tied to the historical incarnated Jesus - a Christian believes in Christ, and as a result a particular sort of lifestyle and community develops that is faithful to Jesus. Those who claim allegiance to him bear a resemblance to him by following his lifestyle and teaching so their faith and practice match. Fellowship with Jesus also brings community fellowship, and gives access to forgiveness and purity. Walking apart from Jesus does none of these things.

John's point is there is no middle ground, there is light and there is darkness. To claim a relationship with Jesus and continue to walk in the darkness, is to kid yourself - worse, it's a lie. If you aren't walking the walk, then your talk is a sham, you cannot call yourself a Christian and walk apart from Christ.

Let me remind you that it was not easy to walk in the light. It cost the early Christians their reputation, friends, status, family, jobs, even their life. That's why people were saying they had fellowship with Jesus, but did things to look like everyone else around them. It's why they were accepting false teaching...and unorthodox ideas are usually presented as spiritually enriching and deeply satisfying. It would have been sorely tempting to take the path to compromise. It's understandable, but its not enough to merely believe it. You must live it. And it's hard to live it. Isn't it?

These words are for us. We cannot claim to be in relationship with a God in whom there is no darkness, and then be indifferent about our lifestyle. You can't give lip service to God and think it won't be noticed, beliefs can be observed in behaviours - you know the tree by its fruit (Matthew 7). If we claim to belong to Christ we spend time in his company and cooperate with his Spirit's work changing us into Jesus' likeness. We will pursue this path.

if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin (1John1:7)

This is the solution for those who are in the dark - end the hypocrisy: come into the light and be cleansed, unite your words and actions, enjoy fellowship with God and his people as you walk with Jesus.

The second and third claims John refutes are to do with denial of sin.

In the surrounding culture one philosophy was dualism, which separated the spiritual from the physical world. Spirit was good and important but matter was insignificant or evil. This meant as long as you had correct 'spirituality' or understanding, bodily activity could be disregarded or overlooked - sometimes this led to depriving the body, other times it led to indulgence. So it is likely that some were saying it was ok to do particular things, live in a particular way, and still be a 'spiritual' Christian, thus claiming to be without sin (1:8). John calls this deception, it's not authentic Christianity.

I'll give you two examples of similar things in our culture. We do a similar thing if we separate Sunday off from the rest of the week, and live by our own standards Monday-Saturday. Saying it's all ok as long as we've done our church rituals. Based on John's removal of the spiritual/physical divide this sacred/secular division is not acceptable either.

How about when we tell ourselves something is 'not *really* sinful.' When we justify a 'white lie,' saying it's ok because of such and such a reason. Or if we categorise sins to give ourselves a loophole, running our finger down the 10 commandments we say 'well, I didn't kill anyone,' so I'm not sinful. In these cases we rationalise our sin away and fail to take responsibility for all our other acts or omissions. John's verdict: 'If we say we have no sin we deceive ourselves'.

The solution: rather than denying our sin we deal with it:

If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness (1John1:9).

This is the heart of the Gospel, we don't have to stay in the muck, we don't have to be burdened by guilt or shame or become delusional to feel better! We come clean, admitting the error of our ways. Sin can be washed away. We can be free to live well in the light.

John has already mentioned the importance of physical reality - Jesus took on flesh, he embraced our existence, honouring it. We are to honour it too. And his obedience to the Father was the same day in day out, in words and actions. It's one reason people said he spoke with authority - not like their other teachers who lacked authenticity.

So...we follow Jesus Sunday to Sunday, with all our heart, soul, mind and strength letting God's light permeate every aspect of our life, every hour of every day. As we do this we become a community of health and wholeness, of light.

Third is the claim not to have sinned at all. In this instance the reason for Jesus' incarnation and sacrifice is denied, there is no need of a Saviour, so his presence on earth and the price he paid is mocked. This denies the teaching of Scripture and the reality of our situation. This claim denies humanity is unclean, unholy, broken, rebellious and estranged from its Maker, it says - we are ok thanks very much, we need no intervention plan, we can take care of ourselves. In doing so it makes God a liar. This cannot be authentic Christianity either.

John understands the pressure the church is under to conform and the hardships they face, which he has experienced himself. Remember he was imprisoned by Rome on Patmos, a piece of volcanic rock in the Mediterranean? He is realistic and his heart goes out to them -

My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1John 2:1-2).

John encourages faithfulness, and reminds them ‘Jesus does not claim that we are innocent, or plead extenuating circumstances. He acknowledges our guilt and presents his work as the ground of our acquittal’ (Smith in Tyndale).

The ultimate solution: true believers have an advocate. Jesus the Christ who has walked our roads and carried our sorrows, comforts us by his Spirit when we are weighed down and oppressed; he speaks to the Father in our defence when we have no words to utter, and we have failed. His pardon is offered and enjoyed by all those who will embrace it. Nothing can separate us from God’s love, his grace is abundant and new every morning.

This is the path of light, in which there is no darkness at all.

John said he had heard, touched and seen Jesus and bore witness to his person and work. It helped him to stand firm. What about us, so far away?

We commit to belief in the historical Jesus known by the Apostles and declared in Scripture, and we walk in a genuine and ongoing relationship with him. We have a lived experience of God because he dwells in us... as 1 John 3:24 says, “We know this by the Spirit he gave us.” She causes the fruit of godliness to blossom in our life and our community, enabling us to persevere and flourish as his people - whatever the cost.

Jesus is the Light of God in whom there is no darkness at all, his light has come into the world and the darkness cannot put it out. Let us trust Jesus, and walk with him as children of the light to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

Feasting on the Word/Gospels Year B; NIV Bible App Commentary; Tyndale Commentary

Summary

1 John is written near the end of the first century. For John truth is based in a person who could be seen, heard and touched. His instruction is based on the fact that Jesus the God-man was real, and he uses imagery of light and darkness to distinguish Christian truth from false versions of Christianity that had emerged.

There are three claims John refutes. To claim true fellowship with God, but not display a godly life is inconsistent with authentic Christianity. A Christian believes in Christ, and as a result of believing a particular sort of lifestyle and community exists that is faithful to Jesus. Faith and practice match up. Those who do not walk in Jesus' light have false claims of fellowship. Secondly, some were claiming to be without sin, saying things they were doing were not really sinful. This failure to take responsibility for behaviour rationalises sin away, resulting in self-deception and a compromised faith. Third is the claim to have not sinned at all. In this instance God is made out to be a liar. As the reason Jesus died is denied, there is no need of a Saviour, and the price he paid is mocked. This claim denies humanity is unclean, unholy, broken, rebellious and estranged from its Maker, it says - we are ok, we need no intervention plan. This is at complete odds with the Gospel.

The temptation to compromise was strong. Complying with local culture made life easier. We are prone to the same temptations, so John's words are for us. Those who claim to fellowship with Jesus love him, walk in his light, and bear a resemblance to him by following his lifestyle and teaching - whatever the cost. Rather than denying sin we deal with it through confession and forgiveness, and step out on the path of Light-filled living as Jesus' witnesses.

John presents the gravity of sin and the path of healing, he is realistic and compassionate, acknowledging human imperfection. He reminds us that Jesus our advocate does not say we are innocent, or plead extenuating circumstances but acknowledges our guilt and presents his work on the cross as the ground of our acquittal. This is the good news of Easter. Praise God.