

12-1-1944

Sermon Study on 1 John 1:1-4

Theo. Laetsch

Concordia Seminary, St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm>



Part of the [Biblical Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Laetsch, Theo. (1944) "Sermon Study on 1 John 1:1-4," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 15, Article 71.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol15/iss1/71>

This Homiletical Help is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Sermon Study on 1 John 1:1-4

Eisenach Epistle for the Fourth Sunday in Advent

Like the Letter to the Hebrews, this Epistle is anonymous. Yet there can be no reasonable doubt that the Apostle John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, the author of the Gospel, is also the writer of this letter. The Church Fathers of the early second century ascribe it to him and even a casual reader will be struck by the many allusions to the Gospel of John scattered throughout the letter, and particularly by the similarity of phraseology and style in the prologs to the Gospel and the Epistle. In 1 John 1:1 there is the "beginning" of John 1:1; "looked upon" is the same word translated "beheld," John 1:14; the Logos is the Logos of the Gospel prolog; so also the "Life" of 1 John 1:1, 2. In v. 2 of the Epistle the phrase "with the Father," *πρὸς τὸν πατέρα*, at once calls to our mind the *πρὸς τὸν θεόν*, "with God," of John 1:1, while the "bear witness," "show," "declare," "write," of 1 John 1:2, 3, 4 correspond to the similar expressions of John 1:7, 8, 15. The letter evidently presupposes the Gospel, at least the same author, and the various terms applied to Jesus in the Epistle find their full interpretation and explanation in the Gospel.

In the opening sentence, vv. 1-3, the object is named first, since that was all-important to John. The subject and predicate are stated in v. 3, "we declare," followed by a final clause stating the purpose of the apostolic declaration, and by a definition of the fellowship named in the final clause. V. 2 is a parenthetical statement describing more fully the glorious object which so completely fills the heart and mind of the Apostle. Briefly stated, the Apostle tells his readers, We preach the eternal Son of the Father, whom we have heard and seen and touched, who is Life eternal, and preach Him to you also that you, together with us, might have fellowship with the Father and the Son, and perfect joy.

The Apostle uses the plural, "we." That is not the editorial plural. As editor he uses the singular, cp. 2: 1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14; 5:13. Nor does the plural refer to John and the elders of Ephesus, for the latter had not seen Jesus. John has in mind himself and all the Apostles, who like him had been called to be messengers of Christ to the world and for this purpose were to spend the three years of His ministry in His immediate presence, to be instructed in the Word of Life by Him who was the Word, the Life, and to be witnesses of Him, of His life, His death, His glorious resurrection, Acts 1:21, 22.

Within this select circle there was a smaller group of three: Peter, James, and John, who were still more closely connected with Jesus, who were privileged to accompany Him where even the other

Apostles were not permitted to go. Cp. Mark 5:37; Matt. 17:1; 26:37. And there is reason to believe that of all the Apostles, even of the three, none was closer to Jesus than John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, who leaned on Jesus' bosom, lay on his breast, John 13:23, 25; 19:20; 20:2; 21:7, 20. Yet in his Epistle he speaks not of his own individual conversations and experiences; he speaks of Jesus as He revealed Himself to all Apostles.

The Apostle begins with a neuter pronoun, *ὃ*, that which. Yet there can be no doubt that he has in mind a personal object. All interpretations which suggest some impersonal object, such as the message concerning the Logos or His miracles or His teaching or the mystery of godliness (cp. 1 Tim. 3:16) or the matters designed by God, etc., are refuted by the context. Grammatically *ὃ* need not refer to an impersonal object. It "expresses a collective and comprehensive whole" (*Pulpit Commentary*) and may be used impersonally, John 4:22, or personally, John 6:37; 17:2. Here it is used as Paul uses it of himself, 1 Cor. 15:10, "By the grace of God I am *what I am*," i. e., *that* Paul who, though not worthy to be called an Apostle, yet labored more abundantly than all the other Apostles. The *ὃ* very clearly links together the person and his attributes and his work, all that makes Jesus of Nazareth what He is, the unique God-man, our Redeemer; links together His humanity and deity, His deepest humiliation and His most glorious exaltation; links together with His person such simple, everyday, purely human activities as eating and drinking and such pre-eminently divine miracles as raising the dead and conquering His own death. It is the person of Jesus, our Redeemer, that the Apostle has in mind, the incarnate Word of God, which was with God, which was God, John 1:1, just as John calls Him in his Epistle, "that eternal Life which was with the Father and was manifested unto us," v. 2. Moreover, the statement "our hands have handled" precludes the possibility that "the Word of Life" here is a mere message or that the Apostle has in mind only teachings or miracles, etc., which cannot be touched and handled.

"That which was from the beginning." These opening words recall to every reader the first words of John's Gospel, which, in turn, point back to the majestic words of Gen. 1:1. In the Gospel, John stressed the eternal godhead of the premundane Word that in the course of time was made flesh. In the Epistle he varies the expression without changing the sense. "From the beginning" does not mean to say that the Logos began only at the beginning. No; that which was from the beginning is defined in v. 2 as the eternal Life which was with the Father; hence He certainly *was* from the beginning, since He was before the beginning eternally with the Father. The Apostle's purpose in choosing "from" rather

than "in" may have been "to remove the idea of novelty, which could lessen the dignity of the Gospel" (Athanasius, Calvin, quoted in *Exp. Greek N. T.*).

"That which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled." The first pair of verbs are perfects; the second, aorists. "The aorists give the past acts, the perfects the permanent results. Together they sum up the apostolic experiences of that boundless activity of Christ of which the world could not contain the full account" (Plummer, in *Pulpit Commentary*) and, we might add, which were assured, undeniable facts, facts which left a lasting, indelible impression on the minds of the Apostles and exercised a regenerating, thoroughgoing influence on their lives.

The repetitions in the opening verses are due not to loquaciousness, empty redundancy, senile verbosity. They are the sincere effort of an Apostle of the Lord to reassure his readers of the absolute reality of the person of Christ and the trustworthiness of their message concerning Him. We are not preaching a creation of our fancy; our Gospel is not the product of philosophic speculation; our Christ is not a fictitious or legendary character. He is real; we have heard and seen and looked upon and handled Him. We know whereof we speak. We have heard Him speak as no man ever spake; words which healed the sick and ailing, present or far away; words that called the dead back to life. With our own eyes we have seen Him (*ὄραω* is the general term for seeing) perform miracles innumerable and past human understanding, John 21:25. "We have looked upon Him" — *θεάομαι* denotes the intentional, careful, scrutinizing looking at an object to learn its real nature. There is no possibility of mistake on our part. We even handled, felt, touched, Him with our own hands. Each item is sufficient evidence; yet each succeeding statement adds to the certainty, strengthens the assurance, intensifies the conviction, so that the cumulative evidence stands incontrovertibly fast and firm. Cp. 2 Pet. 1:16-18.

Having emphasized the humanity of Christ by the four verbs heard, seen, looked upon, handled, the Apostle goes on to explain more fully the content of the first phrase, "that which was from the beginning." He writes, "of the Word of Life." By employing the prepositional construction, *περί*, concerning, about, of, the Apostle removes all doubt as to the personality of the "Word of Life." Had he simply written, as he might have, "We declare the word of life," there might have been some justification for referring at least this phrase to the word of the Gospel, which is also called the word of life, Phil. 2:16. Such an interpretation is invalidated by the *περί*, about. John speaks in v. 1 not about the Gospel, but concerning Christ, the God-man. And to this Person

he applies the same term which he had used John 1:1-3 of the personal Word of God, whom he had identified with the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ, John 1:14.

Just what does this term, "Word," "Logos," applied to Christ only by John, John 1:1-3, 14; 1 John 1:1; Rev. 19:13, mean?

As the thoughts and affections of man's heart are revealed by means of his words, through his speech, so God's thoughts and affections, which no man can know, 1 Cor. 2:7-9, 11, are revealed to us through His word. This revealing word varies greatly as to its nature. It may be a word spoken directly to man, as God spoke to Abraham and other men. It may be the word spoken by men through whom God speaks to mankind. It may be a written word penned by holy men of God as they were moved by the Holy Ghost. It may be that word of God which speaks to man's conscience through that part of His Law still written in his heart. It may be the word spoken through the Angel of the Lord, the Messenger of Jehovah, who is Jehovah Himself, the Second Person in the Trinity, whose word is that of the Father and of Himself, who is One with the Father, through whose word and work and person God reveals Himself. In this last case, therefore, we have a revelation of God not merely by words spoken, by deeds performed, but a revelation in and by a person who is Himself the Lord God. This Person it is whom John in the prolog to his Gospel called the Word, the Logos, a Word that was with God. It is a Person distinct from the Father, even as John in our Epistle distinguishes the Father from His Son Jesus Christ, v. 3. Yet the Word, though being the Son, is in no wise inferior to God, to the Father. John tells us that this Word was in the beginning, the uncreated Word; that this Word was not only with God from eternity, in close and intimate union and communion with God, but that it was God and the Creator of the universe, John 1:1-3. In like manner John calls Him in his Epistle, "that which was from the beginning," the Word of Life, the Life, that eternal Life, 1:1-3; the true God and eternal Life, 5:20. There can be no doubt as to the deity of the Word.

John calls the Word "the Word of Life." The genitive τῆς ζωῆς, of Life, is the genitive of apposition and definition, explaining more fully the nature of the Logos; cp. "the breastplate of faith and love, 1 Thess. 5:8; the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Eph. 2:20. Hence "the Word of Life" designates the Word as being Life. In his Gospel, John had called the Logos the Life, John 1:1-4; and Christ says of Himself, "I am the Life," John 11:25; 14:6. Also in this respect He is One with the Father, with whom is the Fountain of Life, Ps. 36:9, who hath life in Himself and hath given to the Son to have life in Himself, John 5:26.

What the Apostles saw was a true human being, found in fashion as a man, Phil. 2:7, 8. What they touched was flesh and bone, as they were bone and flesh. Yet here was more than man. Here was that Person who was from the beginning. Here was the Word that was with God and was God, John 1:1. Here was Life, Life of Life, very God of very God! What an unsearchable mystery! What unfathomable depths do these simple words of John reveal! Human mind cannot grasp, human language cannot adequately describe, this mystery. Even the Apostle, writing by inspiration of God, the Apostle who saw and heard and touched this Word, this Life, can only declare "about" it, *περί τοῦ λόγου*. "We did not grasp all the wonder, but only its skirts." (Quoted in *Exp. Greek N. T., ad loc.*)

While penning these words, the thoughts of the Apostle turn back to that blessed time of fellowship with the Word of Life, beginning with that unforgotten and unforgettable tenth hour when John and Andrew had left their former teacher, John the Baptist, followed Him whom their former master had pointed out as the Lamb of God, were invited by Jesus to come to His dwelling place, where they abode with Him that day, John 1:35-40. Unforgotten and unforgettable the days and years he and his fellow Apostles were privileged to hear and see what many Prophets and kings had desired to see and hear and had not heard nor seen, Luke 10:24. Unforgotten the day when He began to teach them what they could not understand, Matt. 16:21, and then six days later took His three close associates to a high mountain and was transfigured before them, Matt. 17:1-8. Unforgettable the day when they saw Jesus weep on the way to the grave of Lazarus, when they saw the tears course down His cheeks, a true man, sympathizing with those that weep, seemingly unable to stay the hand of death, yet speaking marvelous words of comfort to Martha, commanding the stone to be lifted away from the grave. And while all looked at Him with amazement, eagerly observing His every action, they heard His majestic word "Lazarus, come forth!" And Lazarus, the man who had lain in the grave four days, came forth alive! Unforgotten that Passover evening spent with Him in the Upper Room when, lying at Jesus' breast, he felt the heartthrobs of his human Savior; when he partook of the sacred Supper such as only the God-man could institute; when he heard words of instruction and admonition and warning and comfort such as could come only from the lips of Him who came down from heaven, even the Son of Man, which is in heaven; when he listened to that sacerdotal prayer, a prayer such as only He could speak who was One with the Father. Unforgettable those hours of deep humiliation in Gethsemane, where He sobbed forth His prayers for removal of

the cup, of His trial in the palace of the high priest; on Calvary's mount when, hanging on the cross, He gave up His ghost; in Joseph's garden, when His dead body was laid in the grave, followed by the days of joy and jubilation when they saw with their own eyes the risen Conqueror of death, and heard His message of peace, and touched again His living body, and watched Him eat and drink, and received from Him their great commission, and watched Him as He ascended to heaven, from whence, according to His promise, He shall come again to judge the living and the dead and take His own to the eternal home prepared for them by Him. All these scenes flashed back into John's memory as he penned the words "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." — Ah, they had heard the Word of Life; they had seen the King in His beauty, Is. 33:17; they had intently gazed upon the Lord of glory, 1 Cor. 2:8; they had touched and felt with their own hands Him who is in the bosom of the Father! What fond memories! What blessed people they had been and still were!

And so absorbed is the Apostle in the recollection of the days when he and his fellow Apostles had been with Jesus that he cannot refrain from spending a few moments more in blessed meditation on the beauty and glory of Him who is indeed the Alpha and Omega of his life. In the form of a parenthesis he continues his contemplation.

"And the Life was manifested," that Life which he had just called the Word of Life and of whom he had said that He was in the beginning, that Life was manifested; cp. John 1:14. That mystery of godliness, without controversy the greatest of mysteries, foretold and anxiously awaited by the children of God for four thousand years, at last it had come to pass. The prophecy was fulfilled, the age-long hope and expectation had at last become a reality, a blessed fact. The aorist ἐφανερώθη gathers all the manifestations of Christ, from His incarnation to the day that the Apostle wrote his letter, into one act of glorious manifestation of Life. Christ, the Life of the world, was manifested when the angels announced to the shepherds their good tidings of great joy, Luke 2: 8-14. This Life was manifested at the deathbed of Jairus' daughter, at the coffin of the youth of Nain, at the grave of Lazarus. This Life was manifested in the very death of the Prince of Life, for by this death he that had the power of death was destroyed, Heb. 2:14, 15. This Life was manifested in His glorious resurrection, when He who had laid down His life of His own free will took it again by His own power. This Life manifested itself in its life-giving, regenerating power in the hearts of the

Apostles and thousands upon thousands of disciples who had been brought from spiritual death to spiritual life by the power of Jesus, the Life.

All this the Apostles had seen, as John again states :“We have seen.” But he now introduces another thought, “We bear witness and show unto you that eternal Life.” Having seen the glory of the Only-begotten of the Father, he and his fellow Apostles are bringing the good news to others; cp. Acts 4:20. This bringing the news is called “bearing witness” and “showing.” The first term again calls attention to the reliability of the news they bring. It deserves to be called “witness” since it is the unanimous testimony concerning a real Person, the Word of Life, whose reality is testified to by many reliable witnesses who have heard and seen and looked upon and handled Him, v.1. Cp. 1 Cor. 15:1-8. This witnessing is called a “showing.” Ἐπαγγέλλω denotes the voicing forth of news on the part of a messenger. The Apostles were messengers sent forth by the highest authority, by Him who is the Word of Life, the Life, that eternal Life which was with the Father, Matt. 28:18-20; Luke 24:45-48; Acts 1:8. At His command they witness and announce to others that eternal Life which was with the Father. He of whom the Apostle had stated that He was from the beginning, whom he had called “the Word of Life,” then “the Life,” is now termed “the Life Eternal.” And the Apostle adds, “which was with the Father.” “With,” *πρός*, designates a close, intimate, face-to-face relation; cp. 1 John 2:1 (an Advocate with the Father). It is a suitable word to describe the relation to God the Father of Him who is the Word of God, the Son of God, who is in the bosom of the Father, who is God, One with the Father, in closest, inseparable, loving, essential union. This eternal Life was manifested to us, the Apostles, and Him we witness and proclaim to you. That is the thought carried out in vv. 3 and 4, which at the same time emphasize the twofold purpose of such witnessing and proclamation.

“That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son, Jesus Christ,” v. 3. St. John had stressed the personal contact with Jesus to such an extent that his readers might conclude that they could never attain to that fullness of communion with Jesus and of that joy in His presence which had been the privilege of the Apostles. That was not the purpose of the Apostle’s message. On the contrary, he had referred to the personal contact only in order to prove the reality of Christ and the trustworthiness of His Gospel of salvation and joy. Continuing the construction of v. 1, he assures them that what the Apostles have seen and heard they now declare to their

readers for the purpose that the readers also may have fellowship with the Apostles.

What kind of fellowship has the Apostle in mind? Not that of the apostolate nor that of hearing Jesus speak and seeing Him with their eyes and touching Him with their hands. True, we hear with the ears of faith the word and voice of Jesus speaking to us through His written Word just as truly and clearly as the Apostles heard His voice speaking to them orally. The method of speaking is different, the voice and word are the same. To this day His sheep hear His Word. It is also true that in this Word we see Jesus, see Him as a child in the manger, see Him in the Temple, see Him baptized in Jordan, follow Him on His journeys, hear Him teaching, watch Him healing, see Him at Lazarus' grave, in the Upper Room, in Gethsemane, on Calvary, see the risen Savior, behold Him ascending to heaven. But the Apostle, while realizing all this, is thinking of a far more glorious fellowship. He says, "And truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ." Our fellowship, that fellowship in which the Apostles stand and into which the readers enter by entering into fellowship with the Apostles, is a fellowship of far greater glory than that of having seen and heard and touched Jesus. Judas did this and was lost forever; the unbelieving Pharisees and Sadducees, many Jews, and not a few Gentiles did this and did not escape damnation. "And, truly," καί . . . δέ; the καί is explanatory and defining, the δέ in connection with καί indicates that something new, unsuspected, surprising, important, is added. Cp. Matt. 10:18; John 6:51; 15:27. The readers did not, like the Apostles, see Jesus; yet by the message of the Apostles concerning this Jesus the readers are being placed, together with the Apostles, as their fellows in faith, into fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. Truly an altogether new and surprising fact! Fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. Here the Apostle for the first time calls Him who was from the beginning, who is the Word of Life, the eternal Life with the Father, by that name so familiar and so dear to all believers, "Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father," once more recalling the glory of His person and His work to the mind of his readers. The Son of God is our God-appointed Savior and Redeemer. And with Him and, through Him, with the Father we are in fellowship.

Fellows, friends, children of God, brethren and sisters of our Redeemer! More than that! The Savior had spoken of this fellowship in His farewell words addressed to His disciples and in His sacerdotal prayer, John 14:23; 15:1-8, 26; 16:7, 13, 14; 17:20-26. It is a fellowship of believers with God whereby the Trinity dwells in them and they in the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost. If God dwells in us and we in Him, surely then God is with us and

then Rom. 8:32-39 applies to us. If God the Father comes to us, together with His Son Jesus Christ, then He comes and fills us with all the fullness of His grace and truth, with forgiveness and righteousness and purity and sanctification and strength and willingness to every good work, with all we need to persevere in faith and hope and love, to reach our journey's goal. If God the Father and the Son dwell in us in intimate fellowship, will they not keep their dwelling place clean and pure? Will not the Son cleanse our hearts from our daily sins by His divine Gospel, the Father forgive our sins and remember them no more, the Holy Spirit daily assure us of these blessed facts and keep us in true faith?

And we in God! What enemy, no matter how powerful and cunning he may be, can harm us if God, our loving Father, and Jesus Christ, our merciful Savior, and the Holy Spirit, our ever present Comforter, is the triple-walled fortress, the impregnable tower, to which we can flee, yes, in which we dwell and live and move and have our being? And while fellowship with the Son of God, Jesus Christ, is naturally a fellowship with Him in suffering, it is, thank God, a fellowship with Him also in His resurrection and glorification, Rom. 8:17; Phil. 3:10; John 17:24.

"And these things write we unto you that your joy may be full," v. 4. John again speaks in the plural. He was not the only one engaged in writing "these things." There was Paul, and Peter, and James, and Jude, and Matthew, and Mark, and Luke, all writing "these things," the message of salvation in Christ Jesus. The Apostle places these writings on the same level with the apostolic preaching, and the terms used before: "bear witness," "declare," "show," include also the Gospels and Epistles written by inspiration of God. The purpose of these writings as well as of their preaching was the perfection of the joy of the readers and hearers of their word.

"May be full," ἡ πληρωμένη. The perfect participle connected with εἰμί emphasizes the "completion, intensity, overwhelming finality," of the root idea, as Gildersleeve, quoted by Robertson in his *Grammar*, p. 907, puts it. The most glorious, most complete and perfect joy of which the human heart is capable in this life is that of a Christian in his Savior and, through Jesus, in his God. That is a God-given, divinely created joy, the Lord Himself supplying the foundation on which it rests and creating this joy in the heart of His child. This joy lives not on uncertainties, on human hopes, on fleeting, vanishing things, only to die and be superseded by weeping and despairing sorrow. No; the Christian's joy lives on eternal realities, on everlasting verities, on God, the Creator and Ruler of the universe, on Jesus Christ, through whom this Ruler has become the believer's reconciled, loving Father. It rests on the

assurance of God's grace, on the certainty of the forgiveness of our sin, on the unwavering sureness of everlasting life — all blessings procured by Him who is Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Word of Life. To make this joy the sun illuminating the path of every believer, to make this joy of the child of God on earth more and more conformable to the fullness of perfection of the joy in heaven, that is the purpose of John's speaking and writing. The preaching of the Word of Life is a power of God to gladden the heart of the Christian in the midst of the sorrows of this world. Reading the Bible, His Word, the Christians learn to know and love Him. There they see the manger and the cross and the empty tomb. There they accompany Him on His life's journey and learn to cherish Him as their Friend, their King, their God, their Redeemer, their one and all, of whom they confess, "For me to live is Christ." Thanks be to God for His unspeakable gift!

We celebrate the birthday anniversaries of men who have rendered outstanding services to their country. This coming week the nativity of a man born 1944 years ago will be celebrated throughout the world, within and without Christendom. Though His name is universally known, He Himself and His life's purpose are little known, John 1:10,11. Many volumes have been written on the question, Who is the real Jesus? In our Epistle we meet a man who knew Jesus by personal contact, by intimate association with Him during the three years of Jesus' public ministry. He writes not on the basis of hearsay; he does not state his own theories; he simply writes what he and others with Him saw and heard and knew to be facts, irrefutable realities concerning the life and work of their Jesus of Nazareth. In answer to the question, *Who Is This Jesus of Nazareth?* he answers: He is the Godhead veiled in flesh, vv. 1 and 2; He is the Author of our fellowship with God, v. 3; He is the Source of everlasting joy, v. 4. — Another suggested theme: *Christmas Day, the Birthday of Mysteries* — the birth of a mysterious person, vv. 1 and 2; of a mysterious fellowship, v. 3; of a mysterious joy, v. 4. The Apostle stresses the message, oral and written, of the Gospel. Hence: *Let Us Gladly Hear and Read God's Word* — for the strengthening of our faith; for the maintenance of our fellowship with God; for the increase of our joy. Or: *Let Us Bring the Christmas Gospel to a Dying World*. Here we have irrefutable truth in a world of fraud and lying; here we have fellowship with God in a world of disunion; here we have fullness of joy in a world of sorrow.

TH. LAETSCH
