

Daniel Akin (NAC, 29–32) summarizes the background for writing 1 John as follows:

First John was written to a church or group of churches in crises—churches who were being attacked by false teaching. Some individuals who had once been associated with the Christian community had adopted heretical doctrine, particularly as it related to Christology, and had left the church. Evidently, after their departure they continued to spread their teachings to those who remained within the Johannine churches. They went so far as to organize and send out itinerant teachers/missionaries who moved among the church with the goal of converting those in the churches to their beliefs. Undoubtedly, this theological assault created confusion and crisis within the believing community.

In response to this situation, 1 John was written with two primary objectives:

1. To combat the propaganda of the false teachers
2. To reassure believers

Four times in the letter John tells us why he writes:

- 1 John 1:4: “These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.”
- 1 John 2:1: “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin.”
- 1 John 2:26: “These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you.”
- 1 John 5:13: “These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

**1:1 What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the Word of Life--
1:2 and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us--
1:3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.
1:4 These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.**

Verses 1–3 are complicated grammatically and less clear than we might hope. The key in understanding verse 1 lies in understanding how verses 1–4 fit together.

We will begin with the last phrase in verse 1, “concerning the word of life.” This is the object of what is proclaimed (1:3). The basic sentence is “we proclaim to you (1:3) . . . concerning the word of life” (1:1). “What the writer has to announce concerns the word of life . . . He has something to tell about it” (Brooke, 5).

According to verse 2, “life” (ζωή—zoe—1:1) is more specifically “eternal life.”

In the Bible *zoe* (life) is the highest term expressing the blessedness of God. It describes that quality or character that is inherent in the Father and the Son (Stott). Yahweh is the author of life (Ps. 36:9). Christ is the very embodiment of life (1:2), conquering death and raising the dead (2 Cor. 13:4; DNTT 11, 481).

The problem we encounter is whether “the word of life” is speaking of the pre-incarnate Christ (as “the Word” does in John 1:1) or “the message of life” (the gospel). Those who argue for the former point out that the Word of life was seen and touched, which cannot be said of a message. Thus, Jesus, the Living Word, is the one whom John proclaimed. Those who argue for the latter view state that “the word” is described by four neuter (not masculine) relative clauses in verse 1; that is, the relative pronoun “*what*” is used of things, not people. They conclude the word of life cannot be a person. In this case, John is speaking of a message of life (or, some say a life-giving message).

In short, the first view sees John speaking of the proclamation of the incarnate Word who is life; the second view sees John speaking of the proclamation of eternal life that is incarnated in the Son.

Both views have strong support; nevertheless, I lean toward the second view—the word of life is the message about life, and the life is manifested in Christ (1:2). In this view, verses 1–4 go together as follows (see Stott, 57ff.; Brown, 164ff.).

- The object of the verb “proclaim” (ἀπαγγέλλομεν) in verse 3 is the message of life (“the word of life”—1:1).
- “*Of life*” expresses the content of the message (Brooke, 5); that is, life is the general subject of the apostolic proclamation (Stott, 58). This is only appropriate if “word” is understood impersonally (Brown, 165).
- The four relative clauses (that begin with “what . . .”) in verse 1 declare the nature of what is proclaimed (Smalley, 5). The revelation of life in the Son (1:1–2) was from the beginning; it was heard, seen, and touched (Smalley, 7).
- Verse 2 is a parenthesis which explains how the life could be seen, heard and handled. It also explains what “life” means in the phrase, “the word of life” (Stott, 57; Westcott, 4). “The life” is “eternal life, which was with the Father.” (The Greek expression “*with the Father*” means “in God’s *presence*”—Brown, 166). The life proclaimed in the gospel message could be seen, heard and handled because it “was manifested” in Christ. Thus, the message of life is the message of Christ (Stott, 68); it is *the revelation of life in Christ* (Jn. 11:25; 14:6; 1 Jn. 5:20).

It is important to note that John’s emphasis in verse 2 is on *life* not the word. One would think if “the word of life” was the pre-incarnate Christ, John would say the Word “was with the Father and was manifested to us.” But he doesn’t. Rather, he is emphasizing the manifestation of *life* in Christ, not the manifestation of Christ Himself as in John 1:14.

- Verse 3 resumes the thoughts begun in verse 1 (so we know that relative pronouns in verses 1 and 3 must be identical in meaning). In verse 3 it is clear that the relative clause (“what we have seen and heard”) is strictly neuter and can have no personal reference (Westcott, 4).
- Verses 3b and 4 describe the purposes of the apostolic proclamation: the message of life is proclaimed (1) “so that you too may have fellowship with us . . . with the Father, and with His Son” and (2) “so that our joy may be made complete.”

- Verse 5 (which begins the main body of the text) picks up the theme of the proclamation of the message in the preface (1:1–4): “This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you . . .”

Based on verses 1 and 2, John and the other apostles proclaimed the message of life that was revealed in Christ. The nature of this manifested life is described as “What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands.”

1. *what was from the beginning (v.1)*

“The beginning” could have the same sense as John 1:1—the beginning of the creation of all things. However, if “the word of life” is the message of the manifestation of eternal life in Christ, then “the beginning” is more likely tied to the incarnation or the beginning of Jesus’ public ministry.

John’s point is that the message hasn’t changed; it has been the same from the beginning. As Brooke states, “The author justifies his claim to be able to announce ‘that which was from the beginning’ on the fact that a revelation of it has been made under the conditions of time and space, so that it has become intelligible to finite understanding” (Brooke, 2). The perfect tense verb has its full force—a revelation has been made in a way that men can understand and the results are abiding (Brooke, 2).

John is testifying that he isn’t introducing something new or any innovation or afterthought; it’s the same teaching that was known before. This is an important point relative to the theme of the book; the false teaching that was being introduced in the church *was* new. The message of the apostles was based on eyewitness accounts that had accurate knowledge of the historical Jesus.

2. *what we have heard (v.1)*

John and others with him heard the message of life. The hearing is not limited by the things that Christ said (Heb. 1:1), though it is most likely Christ’s proclamation that John has in view, especially if “from the beginning” refers to the beginning of Christ’s ministry. It appears that John is stacking up evidence based on personal experience as an eyewitness.

3. *what we have seen with our eyes (v.1)*

The harshness of “handling” or “seeing” a message is removed by verse 2 that explains that the life (which is the content of the message) was manifested in Christ.

In verse 2 John says, “we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us” (1:2).

Note that John says he saw eternal life. If one were to ask how anyone can see eternal life, the answer is because that life was manifested.

“To manifest” (φανερῶν *phaneroo*) means “to make visible” (TDNT, IX, 4), “to make known the unknown” (Brown, 166), or “to reveal.” In John’s writings it often means to make visible before all eyes (Jn. 17:4, 6; 3:21; 9:3). The person of Christ is revelation, summed up in the word “life” (TDNT, IX, 4).

“Manifest” was used by John in relation to Jesus’ earthly ministry (1 Jn. 3:5, 8; Jn. 1:31), His resurrection appearances (Jn. 21:1, 14), and His coming in glory (1 Jn. 2:28). Here John is alluding to the incarnation (Smalley, 9).

John also says that he proclaims the eternal life that was manifested in Christ. In other words, John’s proclamation emphasizes the historical manifestation of life in Christ. It included the things that he had seen with his own eyes.

4. *what we have looked at and touched with our hands (v.1)*

Although “what we have seen with our eyes” may be synonymous to “what we have looked at,” the latter expression in Greek was also used of perception that is non-sensory—seeing something above and beyond what is merely seen with the eye (Jobes, 47). It means “fully seeing, contemplating, and drawing a particular inference from” (Yarbrough, 37). This would suggest that John saw the significance behind the events in Jesus’ life.

It appears that part of the heresy that was spreading among the Johannine churches was Docetism (a belief that denied the humanity of Christ; cf. 1 Jn. 4:2; 2 Jn. 1:7). Docetists affirmed Christ’s deity, but denied His humanity. Perhaps John’s emphasis on having touched Christ is in part a refutation of these heretical notions.

1:3 what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.

1:4 These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

By repeating “what we have seen and heard” verse 3 completes the grammatically incomplete sentence begun in verse 1. Because life was revealed in Christ (Jn. 1:4; 11:25; 14:6; 1 Jn. 5:20, etc.) it became possible for men to apprehend it and bear witness of it. “Seeing” is emphasized (repeated 4X in 3 verses), presumably because sight in particular qualifies men to witness (Stott, 60). What John had seen personally he proclaimed to his readers.

Verses 3 and 4 describe two purposes of the apostles’ message (Stott, 57): The gospel of life brings immediate fellowship and ultimate joy (Stott, 63).

In 1 John 1:3 the purpose of the proclamation of the gospel is not salvation, but fellowship. Properly understood, this is the meaning of salvation in its widest embrace, including reconciliation with God (Stott, 63). Jesus said in John 17:3, “This is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent.” As Jesus was with the Father (1:2), so He purposes that we have fellowship with Them and with each other (Stott, 63). In John 17:21–22 Jesus prayed that the disciples “may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me. The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one.”

The *basis of fellowship* is (1) in the apostolic preaching of the historical Jesus as well as (2) the readers’ response of faith to the proclamation (Akin, 57). Receiving the message of life results in fellowship with

the Father; human fellowship arises spontaneously from divine fellowship (Stott, 64). As Stott says, “We cannot be content with an evangelism that does not lead to the drawing of converts into the church, nor with a church life whose principle of cohesion is a superficial social camaraderie instead of spiritual fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ” (Stott, 64).

Verse 4 states a second purpose—the purpose for writing is so that “our joy may be made complete.” When believers are able to experience fellowship with the Father and the Son, John is filled with joy. A similar example of apostolic joy is found in 3 John 4: “I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.” However, since the oneness in community is mutual, the joy is likely mutual as well: your joy as well as ours (Akin, 60).

The nature of the joy isn’t spelled out, but it is at least the joy of fellowship that has come about by the proclamation of verses 1–3. The proclamation of the word of life results in fellowship, and fellowship results in joy. Joy related to fellowship with God or fellow believers is found often in John’s writings.

- John 3:29 “He who has the bride is the bridegroom; but the friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly because of the bridegroom's voice. So this joy of mine has been made full.”
- John 15:11 “These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.”
- John 16:24 “Until now you have asked for nothing in My name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy may be made full.”
- John 17:13 “But now I come to You; and these things I speak in the world so that they may have My joy made full in themselves.”
- 2 John 1:12 “Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full.”

1:5 This is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is Light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.

John’s desire is to see believers experience fellowship with the Father and the Son. This prompts him to introduce the nature of God as light for this defines the qualifications for fellowship with Him (Akin, 63).

Light is primarily used in the Bible to symbolize truth over error or moral righteousness over evil. Verses 8–9 make it clear that John has the latter in view.

John’s gospel also speaks of light as a moral category:

- John 3:19: “This is the judgment, that the Light has come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the Light, for their deeds were evil.”
- John 3:20: “For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed.”
- John 3:21: “But he who practices the truth comes to the Light, so that his deeds may be manifested as having been wrought in God.”

- John 11:9–10: “Jesus answered, ‘Are there not twelve hours in the day? If anyone walks in the day, he does not stumble, because he sees the light of this world. But if anyone walks in the night, he stumbles, because the light is not in him.’”
- John 12:46: “I have come as Light into the world, so that everyone who believes in Me will not remain in darkness.”

Light and darkness are mutually exclusive. John emphasizes this with the words, “in Him there is no darkness at all.” This dualism in John’s thinking explains why a person who is walking in darkness is disqualified from fellowship with God. Just as light and darkness cannot coexist in the same sphere, neither can righteousness and sin.

1 John 1:2 refers to Jesus as manifested life. Now he speaks of God as light. Life and light are often associated together in John’s writings. For example, in John 8:12 Jesus said, “I am the Light of the world; he who follows Me will not walk in the darkness, but will have *the Light of life*” (cf. Jn. 1:4). Being in the light is being in possession of life.

1:6 If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;

1:7 but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.

John begins the body of his letter by speaking to *professing* Christians who may or may not really be saved (2:19). The repeated conditional sentences in these verses (If we say . . . [vv. 6, 8, 10]) suggest that these were ideas that were floating around that needed to be corrected.

In verse 6 John addresses those who say it is possible to have fellowship with God and yet walk in darkness. “To walk” refers to the way one lives and behaves. The present tense indicates that the behavior is habitual. Those who claim one can have fellowship with God and yet habitually decide to choose darkness are liars and do not practice the truth (1:6).

In verse 3 John said that the purpose of proclaiming the message of life was so we may have fellowship with the Father and the Son. Verses 6–7 make it clear that fellowship describes salvation. In other words, John is not talking about believers whose relationship with God is hindered because they are sinning; rather, he is saying that those who walk in darkness are not saved (they do not have fellowship with God).

In John’s dualistic way of thinking there are only two categories that people can be in; either they are saved and children of light who walk in the light and have fellowship with God, or they are still in darkness, walk in darkness, and separated from fellowship with God.

As Jobes says:

Because God is light, everything that is the antithesis of God is darkness. John uses the mutually exclusive duality between light and darkness to order and structure his theological worldview, both in the letters and the gospel. God, who is the light of life, came into a dark world, and the

darkness was not able to extinguish the light (Jn. 1:4, 5, 9). Starting with light and darkness, John builds a dualistic frame based on binary polarities: above and below, good and evil, truth and lies, life and death. As John presents the human condition, each person is in the light or in the darkness, which is surely a vantage point only God Himself knows. For in the end, all will be sorted into only two groups, but at the present time those who are in darkness may come into the light, and some who claim to be in the light are actually still in darkness (1 Jn. 2:9). The point John makes with his moral duality is an eschatological point, showing that one's standing with God is not always evident from a snapshot of a moment in one's life (Jobes, 65–66).

Those who walk in darkness do not practice the truth. "Truth" in our thinking is usually defined as a fact that is in accordance with reality. Truth in John's writings is something that is also revelatory in nature; it includes both the facts and the significance of the facts. Verse 7 illustrates this. Jesus' death is a historical fact. The significance of His death is that it "cleanses us from all sin." Truth includes both the fact of Jesus' death and its meaning. Furthermore, truth is seen as something that is done; it is practiced. Literally, John says that the one who walks in darkness lies and does not "do" ("practice" ποιέω *poieo*) the truth. To "do" the truth is to live out one's life in accord with what God has revealed as true. In this case to "do the truth" is to walk in the light because God has revealed that He is light.

The light transforms those who receive it. Those who continue to practice the works of darkness are not in fellowship with the light. Their conduct belies their claim (Brooke, 13). One's words must be backed up by his entire manner of life if he is to claim fellowship with God the Father.

Verse 7 is the contrast to those who claim to have fellowship but walk in darkness. We might have expected John to say, "if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship *with Him*." But he doesn't. Instead he says, "we have fellowship *with one another*." This shows the intimate relationship between God and the community of believers. Fellowship with God is embodied in fellowship with believers and neither can be experienced if we do not walk in the light. Fellowship with one another is the first result of walking in the light.

The second result of walking in the light is in verse 7b: "the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin."

God does more than forgive sin; He erases the stain of sin. Christ's death *cleanses* us from sin. The cleansing action is continuous (present tense); it is always in operation for those who walk in the light. The one who walks in the light has already come to the light (is saved) and therefore receives forgiveness for the sins he commits. Fellowship with God and others, walking in the light, and being cleansed from sin, are all parts of the same package; if one is missing the others do not hold true.

John's dualistic framework in discussing the human condition creates many questions in the minds of modern Christians. For example, it "raises the question of whether those who are walking in the light as believing Christians *can* sin. In John's strong duality between light and darkness, sin is on the side of darkness, and John describes no twilight that might allow for an admission of sin in the lives of light-dwellers" (Jobes, 71). However, as the following verses show, "walking in the light" doesn't rule out occasional acts of sin.

1:8 If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.

1:9 If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

In verse 6 John had mentioned those who do not do the truth. “John now begins to *develop* the association between sin and truth. This second pair of contrasting conditions involves one’s attitude toward sin. John claims that if anyone should say that they have no sin to deal with, they are self-deceived” (Jobes, 70). The logic between “the truth is not in us” and the first part of the verse is that if the truth were in us it would be efficacious (Brown, 207).

The claim in verse 6 admitted to having sin but didn’t feel it was affecting one’s relationship to God. The claim in 1:8 is worse for it denies having sin. Some see this as meaning that they deny having a sin nature (Brooke, 17; Stott, 77), but in the Gospel of John the expression “to have sin” is used four times, and each time it refers to being guilty of sins (Jn. 9:41; 15:22, 24; 19:11). Thus, some may have been expressing a perfectionist theology: “We have never had the slightest lapse into evil.” They believed they were not guilty of sin; that is, they had not sinned since they had come to faith in Christ (Kruse, 66; Brown, 205–206 is good of the use of “have”; also see Carson for the above verses in the Gospel of John).

These are not deliberate liars; they are people who are self-deceived (Stott, 77). The deception is due to one’s own efforts—“we deceive ourselves.” In our hearts we know that the affirmation is false, but we persuade ourselves that it is true. Such a claim shows that the truth is not working in us (Brooke, 19). If the truth was in us, we would be aware of our own deceitfulness (Stott, 77).

“The issue of self-deception regarding sin in one’s Christian life is perennial. Fallen human nature leads us to rationalize our sin and thereby deny it. Vigilance all throughout life is called for, with each decision to speak or act” (Jobes, 70).

The alternative to denying one’s sin is to confess it (Jobes, 71). Denying one’s sin is consistent with walking in darkness; recognizing and confessing sin is the behavior of those who walk in the light.

Forgiveness and cleansing are conditioned on confession (1:9). The Bible gives many warnings about concealing sins and many promises of blessing for confessing and forsaking them (Ps. 32:1–5; Pr. 28:13) (Stott, 78). To confess means to agree with another, to admit the truth of an accusation. When “the other” is God, it means to agree with God that what He calls sin *is* sin. The confession John is talking about is personal and specific. We are called upon to confess *our* particular sinful acts (plural), not just admit that we are sinners in a general, nondescript manner.

However, the efficacy of confession is not in the confessor but in the righteousness and faithfulness of God—“if we confess our sins, *He is faithful and righteous* to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

In the New Covenant God promised, “I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin I will remember no more”(Jer. 31:34; Stott, 77). God will fulfill His promise; He is faithful.

God is also righteous (just). God cannot treat the sin as if it had never happened; sin must be punished, but He will forgive those who ask Him, freeing man from sin's condemnation (Brooke, 20).

In sum, the Apostle offers a correction to those who insist that they have no sin in verse 8. He then contrasts believers to them in verse 9. Believers know that they have sin and readily admit their sins. They are a people for whom confession is characteristic. In other words, John is not saying that in order to receive forgiveness we must not rest until every sin and every nuance of sin has been laid before God in prayer; rather, he is saying that walking in the light not only means that we are fundamentally changed by God in terms of obedience, but that we see our sins clearly and admit them. This results in being totally forgiven and cleansed from every sin on the basis of the death of Christ.

1:10 If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

The third group of people that John speaks of are those who say, "We have not sinned." "Have not sinned" translates a perfect tense verb that indicates a past action with continuing results. In this case it is the habitual denial of sin. This is the most blatant of all the denials. This is not just a lie or self-deception; this makes God the liar.

God declares that sin is universal (I Ki. 8:46; Ps. 14:3; Eccl. 7:20; Isa. 53:6; 64:6), and the offer of salvation assumes that sin is a reality (Stott, 79). If we say we have not ever sinned, we are saying that God is wrong; sin is not universal and we don't need salvation; He is lying. This would be obvious evidence that His word is not in us (1:10b).

Conclusion:

John proclaimed the message of life that was manifested in the Son so that we can have fellowship with God. This message includes walking in light for God is light.

Therefore, if we claim that sin doesn't affect our relationship with God (1:6a) we lie and do not practice the truth (1:6b). Habitual sin is evidence that we are not saved. But if we are walking in the light we demonstrate that we have come to the light and Jesus cleanses us from sin.

If we claim that we have not sinned since we believed (1:8a) we are self-deceived and God's truth isn't in us (1:8b); that is, we aren't really saved. But if we confess our sins He will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1:9).

If we claim that we have never sinned, we are calling God a liar and His word is not in us (1:10).