

Focal Text

1 John 1:1—2:2

Background

1 John 1:1—2:2

Main Idea

The gospel of God's really coming in human flesh in his Son Jesus Christ demands that we live faithfully for him.

Question to Explore

If God really came in Jesus, how should that affect how we live?

Teaching Aim

To lead the class to identify implications for their lives of the meaning of God's coming in Jesus Christ

1, 2, 3 JOHN



Measuring Authentic Christianity

Lesson One

Really Living for the God Who Really Came

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

As the first century was careening to a close, believers found themselves facing external pressures from community and government as the Roman citizenry began to persecute them more intensely. Combined with this, internal issues related to new cultural and philosophical perspectives about theology arose among the churches. Addressing these situations, the Letters of 1, 2, and 3 John brought words of practical assurance to those needing a comforting message in the middle of their storm.

The three letters ascribed to John in the New Testament (1, 2, 3 John) add an interesting picture of church life during the last quarter of the first century. First John announces no author within its text, whereas 2 and 3 John claim to have been written by “the Elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1). Church history and tradition assigned authorship of the documents to the Apostle John, with him writing them during the latter days of his life. That being the case, then five of the twenty-six books of the New Testament share the same author—these three letters, the Gospel of John, and the Book of Revelation.¹

The letter titled “1 John” is a collection of teachings that has as one of its main purposes seeking to correct and counter some wrong beliefs that had entered into the church. An early form of Gnosticism was making its way into the thought and theology of many congregations. Incipient Gnosticism (which would have its fuller expression during the second century) was a perspective of Christianity that reflected a popular Greek dualistic philosophy.

In this philosophy, material items and things that could be seen (for example, one’s body) had no value and were considered to be evil. Spiritual realities and things beyond sight (for example, one’s mind) were valuable and considered good. An easy handle on expressing this thinking is that flesh is evil and spirit is good.

This dichotomy led to little need for human teachers and instruction since they were representative of a *flesh* way of learning. A *spirit* way of learning would be for divine special revelations to be given to those who had matured beyond the average person. Special revelations gave greater knowledge and led to the belief system being called “Gnosticism.” The Greek word for “knowledge” is *gnosis*.

The Gnostic approach led to difficulty in grasping the eternal truth about Jesus Christ. Since flesh was evil, the man named Jesus was considered to be of no significance in obtaining salvation. Redemption was enjoyed only through a connection with the spirit of Christ. This attempt to slice the Savior apart provides the backdrop for much of the material in 1 John (especially the first chapter).

Interpreting the Scriptures

The early Gnostic background known to John’s readers provides a strong undercurrent to the first major section of 1 John. Since the letter contains none of the customary greetings and endings typically found in first-century letters, this book was likely a sermon in its original usage. The sermon addressed a body of believers about the divine and human realities of Jesus Christ. John then would have added transitional sentences and an introductory paragraph to the sermon in order to send it to believers who were facing similar circumstances.

The Prologue About God’s Really Coming in Human Flesh (1:1–4)

The introductory paragraph of 1 John can be called an *anti-Gnostic prologue* as it speaks about the *fleshliness* of Jesus. The ultimate truth about Jesus was that his existence had been eternal even from the beginning. The One who was once in the beginning had come to live, breathe, and walk in human flesh as the Son of God.

1:1–3. The apostolic proclamation about God’s final revelation of Jesus Christ begins 1 John. These three verses make up one sentence in the original Greek language. The verses are built on the verb “we proclaim” in verse 3. John wanted his hearers and readers to know that he had enjoyed close fellowship with a real human being—not a spirit, an apparition, or something invented by philosophical thought.

The verbs used by John in the first verse denote human interaction. John had “heard,” “seen,” “looked at”, and “touched” God in the flesh. What set this experience apart from regular societal interaction was that John had handled the One who had been “from the beginning.” John’s introductory paragraph built upon the way his Bible (Genesis 1:1) and his gospel (John 1:1) began—“in the beginning.”

“Word of Life” combines two of the more common terms used by John to describe Jesus. John had introduced Jesus as the “word” (*logos*) at the beginning of his gospel. Now John reminded his hearers that true living would come only through a relationship with Jesus. Because “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we saw His glory” (John 1:14), life for the followers of Jesus had been patterned by divine example. The reality of the incarnation (God becoming flesh) brought the ultimate expression of truth and laid the foundation for the ethical lifestyle that Jesus’ disciples were to incorporate into their lives. Since God had dwelt among humanity, people could know life lived to its fullness.

John bore witness to the eternal life made possible through Christ (1 John 1:2). Most of his readers were of generations later than the time of Christ, and they thus would not have had personal interaction with the man Jesus as had John. His use of terms related to the natural senses reminded his readers about the historical Jesus.

A personal relationship with the “Word of Life” would bring fellowship with God and God’s people. “Fellowship” (*koinonia*) describes the act and state of holding things in common. Sharing life with the God who lived it in the flesh brought true commonality for those who shared

fellowship with one another under John’s ministry. Having “fellowship . . . with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ” (1:3) denotes a partnership that would carry forth through faithful living. Denying human life for Jesus (an idea found in Gnosticism) brought a false fellowship since truth was to be found in a relationship with the full manifestation of the person of Jesus Christ.

1:4. One of the purposes of the epistle can be found in this verse. John indicated that “we write so that our joy may be made complete.” The usage of the first-person plural pronoun “we” throughout the letter heightened the significance of the experience of fellowship. The local congregations John addressed were also joined by the history of those generations of believers who had come before. God’s people knew the truth of God’s life in the flesh and rejoiced in knowing God as a friend. Joy would be complete when Christians came together and held common fellowship with one another and with God.

Really Living in the Light of Righteousness (1:5—2:2)

1:5. Life can best be lived when the light shines. John announced the fundamental “message” that no darkness resides in God’s character since God is “Light.” God illuminates the church so that their fellowship can be enjoyed and their lives be full. Light arrives in the midst of darkness when one experiences the assurance of knowing Jesus. Light does not come through special revelations or false philosophical or theological ideas.

1:6–10. Verses 6, 8, and 10 introduce Gnostic slogans. Whenever John began a statement with “if we say,” he would follow with sayings prevalent among those who followed the Gnostic ideology. He contrasted the falseness of those statements with the truth of righteous living and actions.

One such false idea was “if we say that we have fellowship with Him” (1:6) while living in moral darkness. One who claimed to be in fellowship with the Father was to live in accordance with God’s nature as light. Those who experienced the light of God as seen in the Son could now live in God’s light in the midst of the world’s darkness. The darkness of John’s world featured the gloom of sin and its control over those in the world. Life lived in sin operated in darkness away from God’s light.

Having entered into fellowship with God who is light, the believer acknowledges that relationship by walking out of the darkness into the light. Claiming fellowship with God while behaving as one who lives in darkness demonstrates the absence of truth. To make such a claim is to “lie,” since it is impossible to walk in God’s presence while living in moral darkness.

John recognized no gradations of righteousness. It was either truth or lie, light or darkness. There was an absolute moral necessity to “walk in the light as He Himself is in the light” (1:7). Nothing else would be acceptable.

Walking in the light would bring two benefits: (1) fellowship with other believers; and (2) cleansing from all sin. Obedience to God’s word best describes what it means to walk in the light. Awareness of sins becomes more evident when one walks in the light, resulting in a fellowship of forgiven believers who have experienced the cleansing that comes from the blood of Jesus.

A second false idea in relation to sin is seen in the expression, “if we say that we have no sin” (1:8). This Gnostic idea highlighted the notion that sin did not exist since it was merely an act of the flesh. To deny such blatant reality of moral deficiency in one’s life was self-deceiving, showing a lack of truth. Unawareness of one’s guilt becomes a problem that can affect anyone in the church, as is seen in John’s use of “we.” God’s truth has not found a home in the hearts of those who deceive themselves about the absence of sin.

Contrasting that false idea, John spoke in 1:9 of the necessity of confession. Confession to God indicates an agreement with God in which one says the same thing about sin that God says about it. Instead of denying the existence of sin, the one who lives according to God’s light brings the sin to God. Willingness to confess is not based on one’s righteousness but on God’s faithfulness—“He is faithful.” The loving Father’s faithfulness to his children brings forgiveness and cleansing.

The third false Gnostic idea was “if we say that we have not sinned” (1:10). This Gnostic teaching stated that anything the fleshly body did had no value one way or the other since it was produced by what was evil anyway. Actions of the flesh thus were not “sins” since it did not matter what the body did. As the culmination of these false claims, such a pronouncement would “make Him a liar and His word is not in us.” The seriousness of sin should not be denied since such a denial would

go against human experience and everything God has indicated about people in Scripture. Of all things to avoid would be an action that would indicate that God is a “liar.”

2:1–2. John intended for this letter to encourage believers (“my little children”) to a purposeful life of seeking to please God by avoiding sin as they lived in the light (2:1). The possibility and probability of displeasing God by slipping into sin, however, was going to happen along the journey for the believer. The Christian who has sinned still has fellowship with “Jesus Christ the righteous” who serves as an “Advocate” (Greek, *parakletos*). The advocate was one *called alongside* to plead one’s cause and to bring aid. As the Father’s Son in the flesh, Jesus constantly ministers to believers by serving as their Advocate. His righteousness covers the sins of Christians who stumble as they walk in God’s light.

Along with being the Advocate, Jesus also serves as an atoning sacrifice (“propitiation”) to bring about the forgiveness of sins (2:2). A “propitiation” (Greek, *hilasmos*) originally described an offering to appease an offended God. Such imagery indicates the seriousness of sin in the lives of God’s children. The mercy and grace found in Christianity is seen in that God provided the necessary sacrifice in Jesus. The effectiveness of Jesus’ sacrifice brought forgiveness of the believers’ sins and “also for those of the whole world.” Forgiveness comes only through God in the flesh—Jesus Christ.

Focusing on the Meaning

Dark moments, difficult times, and despairing circumstances can bring believers to the place where questions rise about their relationship with God, especially when they encounter sin. Popular thought can fly in the face of traditional belief and raise concerns about the ultimate truth of God taking on flesh in Jesus. To overcome sin, words of assurance and forgiveness motivate us to a life based on the truth of a life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

Especially vivid during the Christmas season, the incarnation signaled the arrival of God as the “Word of Life” who became flesh and lived in the midst of a real world. Jesus came to be born in the flesh, lived a full life with all the constraints of the flesh, and experienced the cessation of his flesh through a real death. Christians demonstrate their faith in Jesus

as they face the realities of their lives. A lifestyle reflecting a relationship with the Lord provides a genuine testimony about forgiveness from God.

Freedom and grace are found in a daily walk with the Lord. The One who walked the streets of Jerusalem, moved in the midst of crowds of people, placed his hands on people, and tasted the pain of death paved the way for his followers to experience life at its fullest. John's hearers and readers were to walk in the light of the Lord's righteousness.

True fellowship with God can be seen in sharing life's experiences with Jesus Christ. With God as "light," believers can see the way through their circumstances. God's character welcomes those who would walk out of the darkness to have fellowship with him. Accepting this truth, confession of sins brings forgiveness and cleansing.

Life should be lived with the desire to please God at every turn. With Jesus as the "Advocate," grace and mercy are available for those times when wrong actions result in sin. Jesus' covering of sins frees Christians to enjoy a purpose-filled life, knowing that Jesus is always there with them. With such knowledge, Christians will be really living for the God who really came.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Display on a table measuring instruments such as a yardstick, ruler, kitchen measuring spoons, clock, calendar, thermometer, or scales. Place your Bible on the table, but not in the most prominent place. Ask: *What do these items have in common?* After responses, pick up two or three items and ask: *What does this item measure?* Then pick up the Bible and ask: *What does this measure?* After several answers, point out that today we begin a six-week study of 1, 2, and 3 John. Refer to the *Study Guide* and inquire, *What is our theme for the study of John's letters?* (Measuring Authentic Christianity) Ask: *Is it really possible to measure Christianity?* State that our study of the lessons in this unit will help answer this question.

2. Lead the class to turn in the *Study Guide* to the table of contents and write the dates for the lessons in the spaces provided.

Guide Bible Study

3. Refer to the questions in the first paragraph of “Introducing 1, 2, 3 John” in the *Study Guide*. Point out that 1 John answers *yes* to these questions. Ask, *Do you?* Set the stage for the study of 1, 2, 3 John by sharing information from the introduction in the *Study Guide* plus “Understanding the Context” in this *Teaching Guide*.
4. Call on a class member, assigned ahead of time, to make a two- or three-minute presentation on Gnosticism. Suggest that the member use information under “Does Matter Matter?” in the *Study Guide* and other resources, such as a Bible dictionary. Be sure the member includes the two basic beliefs: (1) All matter (such as flesh) is evil and all non-matter (such as spirit) is good; and (2) knowledge—a special, secret kind—is required for salvation and fellowship with God. After the report, explain to the class that in today’s lesson, the writer sought to respond to these false teachings.
5. Divide the class into three study groups. Instruct the groups to use their Bible and the *Study Guide* to find answers to the assigned question (a copy of the assignments is available at www.baptistway-press.org). Give the groups five to seven minutes to find the answers.

Group 1: Does Matter Matter? (1 John 1:1)

- Discover several reasons matter does matter.

Group 2: Does the Message Matter? (1 John 1:2—2:2)

- Find reasons the message *does* matter and arguments against the notion that behavior *doesn't* matter.

Group 3: Do Others Matter? (1 John 1:3–7)

- List several reasons why others do matter.

6. Give each group time to answer their question. Then call for reports. When making their report, ask each group reporter to read the assigned Scripture and then give the reasons. After each report, ask the discussion question indicated below.

- After group 1: *What are some reasons people give today for denying that Jesus came in the flesh?*
- After group 2: *What are some excuses people give today for unrighteous behavior? What are some ways in which believers can walk in the light?*
- After group 3: *What are some ways that people exclude others from Christian fellowship? What are some ways that believers can include others in Christian fellowship?*

Encourage Application

7. Share with the class the situation in “Case Study” in the *Study Guide*. After stating that Robert was faced with a dilemma, ask: *What are Robert’s options?* Then ask: *If you were Robert, what would you do? Why? How does your answer measure up against the writer’s admonition to “walk in the light?”*
8. Close with a prayer of thanksgiving that Jesus did come in the flesh and of petition that Jesus will help us walk in the light every day this week.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Invite the class to suggest items we measure day by day (time, sweetener in coffee, height of children, our weight, miles we drive, money in the bank, etc.). List suggestions on the board. State that no one (likely) mentioned “Christian living.” Ask: *Is Christian living something we can measure?* Invite the class to look at the cover of their *Study Guides*. Inquire, *What is the title of the first study?* (Measuring Authentic Christianity) Point out that our studies for the next six weeks will help us learn how we can measure our Christianity.
2. Ask everyone to open the *Study Guide* to the table of contents and write the dates for the first six sessions in the spaces provided.

3. Display the following outline for the class:

- Does Matter Matter? (1 John 1:1)
- Does the Message Matter? (1 John 2—2:2)
- Do Others Matter? (1 John 1:3–7)
- The Message for Us

Guide Bible Study

4. Refer to the first outline point, “Does Matter Matter?” Ask: *Have you ever served on a jury dealing with a traffic accident? What kind of testimony was most effective?* (Likely answer: eyewitness) *Why?* (Because the person was actually there and saw the event.) Ask for volunteers to read 1 John 1:1 from several translations. Ask: *What kind of witness was the writer?* (Eyewitness) *What did he witness?* (A flesh-and-blood, human Jesus) Explain why matter mattered. Include an explanation of Gnosticism.
5. Refer to the second outline point, “Does the Message Matter?” Call on a member to read 1:2—2:2 aloud. Instruct the class to follow in their Bibles. Have half the class listen and look for (1) why the message matters, and the other half for (2) why the idea that behavior doesn’t matter is wrong. See the *Study Guide* for three answers to each.
6. Refer to the third outline point, “Do Others Matter?” Have a member read aloud again verses 3–7. Instruct the class to listen for reasons others matter. (Possible answers: to have joy in the church and in our lives, 1:4, 7; to validate the authenticity of one’s profession of faith, 1:6–7) Ask: *How does Christian fellowship differ from just being with people?*

Encourage Application

7. Refer to the final outline point, “The Message for Us.” Summarize the paragraphs under this heading in the *Study Guide*. Then lead the class to discuss the questions at the end of the lesson in the *Study Guide*.

8. Review the main points of the lesson and ask class members to measure how authentic their Christianity is by reflecting on the sections as follows:
 - a. “Does Matter Matter?” *Do you have any doubts about your faith? How do the writer’s eyewitness words help?*
 - b. “Does the Message Matter?” *Are you currently living “in the light”? If not, what do you need to do to “live in the light”?*
 - c. “Do Others Matter?” *What place does Christian fellowship have in your daily and weekly activities?*
9. Close with prayer that God will convict us of the areas in our lives where we do not measure up as authentic Christians, that we will confess our sins in these areas, and that we will seek God’s forgiveness and cleansing.

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in the lessons on 1, 2, 3 John are from the New American Standard Bible (1995 edition).