



I

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD

(I JOHN I:I-4)

Introduction

In the opening paragraph of 1 John we are somewhat abruptly, yet quite wonderfully brought face to face with truth that is both profound and precious. Formal greetings are set aside with the result that the letter, though directed to a specific group, is nevertheless given a universal application. But the lack of formal greeting also has the effect of underlining the urgency and importance of what follows. In words that echo the start of the Fourth Gospel, John directs our attention back to 'the beginning' and to the 'Word of Life' which was 'with the Father', which 'has appeared' and to which John now seeks to bear 'witness'. Familiar Johannine themes abound, yet on closer examination we discover that the opening paragraph of 1 John is not simply a repackaging of the Prologue of the Fourth Gospel.

The focus of the opening paragraph is three-fold:

First, our attention is directed to and fixed upon the Word of Life who appeared in history in the person of



Jesus the Christ. As we shall see, this Jesus centredness is a key feature of the letter, even of those sections which do not deal directly with doctrine.

Second, we are told that the appearance of the Word of Life in history has given rise to the testimony and proclamation of those who were ear- and eye-witnesses, those who like John himself 'heard' and 'saw' and 'touched' the incarnate Word. It is this apostolic witness, in contrast to the confident but spurious claims of the 'liars', which will provide both a firm foundation for fellowship with God and a true basis for Christian assurance.

Third, we are told the reason for the appearance of the Word and thus the first of two great concerns that motivated John to write his letter, namely joyful fellowship with God through Jesus Christ. This fellowship with God, first experienced by John and others who knew Jesus face to face, was not for them alone but indeed for all who would come to know Jesus through their testimony.

Listening to the text

Context and structure

In the original the first three and a half verses of the letter form a single, complex and carefully structured sentence. The subject of the sentence and the primary focus of the writer's interest is 'the Word of Life' (later 'the eternal life' or simply 'the life') which was 'with the Father' but which has now appeared both in the physical world and, more particularly, to John and his associates. The verbal structure of this opening sentence places the emphasis first on the historical appearing of the Life (v. 2a) and then upon the testimony of those to whom the Life first appeared (v. 2b). The twin purpose clauses in verses 3 and



4 seem at first glance to refer to two different objectives. But these clauses are in fact closely connected to each other and to the implied reason for the appearance of the Life. The appearance of the Life, the proclamation of the Life and the purpose of writing are all so that John's readers may in fact share the joyful fellowship with God that John and his associates have found through Jesus who is this Eternal Life.

Although they are as yet unmentioned, it is worth noting that behind John's choice of words and the careful structure of his logic, there stands the spectre of the liars whose own claims to fellowship with God apart from the historical Jesus and the apostolic witness were so unsettling to the church to whom John wrote.

Working through the text

Despite the string of neuter pronouns which describe the object of what John and his associates heard, saw, looked at, touched and proclaimed, it is clear both from the context and from John's choice of words (especially the words looked at and touched) that the object of John's observation and proclamation is Personal rather than abstract or impersonal. John is not describing the dawning of a new philosophical or spiritual insight nor is he announcing the arrival or discovery of a new message to be proclaimed. At the heart of John's personal experience and thus at the heart of his message is the Personal, Divine Word of Life (v. 1, cf 1 John 5:20) which has 'appeared' (v. 2).

John begins by telling us that this Word of Life or Life was 'from the beginning' (v. 1) as well as 'with the Father' (v. 2), two descriptions that are surely closely connected to the description of the Personal Word in the Prologue





of John's gospel. There the reader was told that the Word 'was in the beginning' and that the Word 'was with God.' (John 1:1). Here, in the introduction to the letter, the reader is told that this same Eternal Life (v. 2) which was always with the Father, has now 'appeared' – that is appeared in history (a reference to the incarnation), and that this Life has 'appeared to us' – that is appeared in particular to John and his associates who were to be the witnesses to the Life (v. 2). It is important to note that the verb 'appeared' is in fact co-ordinate with and not subordinate to the other verbs 'have seen' and 'witness' and 'proclaim' with the result that it is both the appearing of the Life and the witnessing to the Life that form John's main concern in this opening paragraph. As we shall see, this fact of the incarnation of the Life will become one of the major touchstones for orthodoxy and authenticity later in the letter.

It is because the Life appeared to John and his associates in visible and tangible form that they were able not only to hear and see and look at and touch the Life, but also to proclaim the Life to others with accuracy and authority. The verb 'appeared' is used twice in verse 2, at the beginning and the end of the verse, thus bracketing the verbs 'have seen' and 'witness' and 'proclaim'. The implication of this carefully constructed sandwich is that the Life which appeared in the world must of necessity be proclaimed to the world and this by those who had the credentials to do so. This authoritative proclamation stands, of course, in contrast to the words of the false teachers whom we will meet in the rest of the letter.

But John is not simply concerned with the fact of the Word of Life's appearance in history or indeed with the



proclamation of the Light for its own sake. John is also deeply concerned with why the Life appeared and thus with why the Life should be proclaimed. John's logic is brilliant and compelling. By means of two purpose clauses (v. 3 and v. 4) John connects the proclamation of what he and his associates 'saw and heard' concerning the Life with his purpose in writing his letter. The letter becomes the confirmation of what was seen and heard and is written for the purpose of shared fellowship and mutual joy. (Our joy (v. 4) is a better reading than 'your joy', but the 'our' is used in an inclusive rather than exclusive sense.)

But this joy of fellowship which John wants to share with the readers is precisely the joy of fellowship with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (v. 3). The Life who 'was with the Father' and who has fellowship with the Father appeared in the flesh in the person of Jesus the Christ. The goal of this appearance was that people may once again have fellowship with God, the eternal life for which we were created (v. 2 *cf* John 17:3 and the frequent references to 'knowing God' in the letter). But such fellowship with God is only possible through the One who knows and has fellowship with God the Father and who has now appeared, Jesus the Christ. It was through Jesus and Jesus alone that John and his associates found fellowship with the Father. And it is through Jesus and Jesus alone that others will enter that joyful fellowship as well. The question is thus 'How can those who did not see Jesus face to face have fellowship with Him?' John's answer is simple but breath-taking. Fellowship with Jesus is only possible via fellowship with John and the others who were ear- and eye-witnesses to the Life which appeared in Jesus. For John's first readers and for

the subsequent generations, fellowship with God through Jesus Christ takes place only by hearing and believing the apostolic gospel. That is why the Life appeared and why the Life must be proclaimed.

From text to message

As the introduction to John's letter, 1 John 1:1-4 also functions excellently as an introduction to a sermon series on 1 John. Two key truths, each essential for the accomplishment of John's purpose, are introduced. First, a vital link between the Christ of faith and the Jesus of history is established through John's testimony to the appearance of the Divine Word of Life in the person of Jesus Christ. Second, the importance of and the reliability of the apostolic witness is established as a point of reference for Authentic Christian experience. The complexity and theological richness of the passage mean that it is easy to get bogged down in the detail on the one hand or diverted into preaching theological generalities on the other, and so doing, to miss the main point and purpose of the passage which is to introduce us to the reality and means of joyful fellowship with God.

Getting the message clear: the theme

The Word of Life has appeared and has been proclaimed by John and his associates so that we may have authentic fellowship with God the Father through Jesus the Son.

Getting the message clear: the aim

To encourage believers to pursue joyful fellowship with God through faith in Jesus the Christ as we know Him through the apostolic gospel.

A way in

Begin talking about the idea of intimate relationship or close partnership and then tying this to the word 'fellowship'. Raise the possibility of fellowship with God – and the desirability of such fellowship. Ask the questions 'how can such fellowship be real? How can it be real for us?' Point out that it was precisely to bring about this fellowship that John wrote and that by taking what he wrote seriously we too can have the joy of authentic fellowship with God.

A second way in is to approach the passage from the point of view of authority. We live in a world full of claims to spirituality, each of them offering a way to know God. How can these claims be evaluated? Which of them can be trusted? 1 John 1:1-4 presents us with such a claim. The question is, is it a valid claim and, if so, why so? If the claim of 1 John 1:1-4 is valid what does this do to the many claims to spirituality with which we are surrounded?

Ideas for application

- Fellowship with God for each of us is deeply desirable and precious. It is the source of all true joy. It may not be something we want by nature – but it is something we desperately need.
- The coming of Jesus into the world did not only make fellowship with God possible for those who knew Him face to face. It makes fellowship with God possible for us today. All we have to do is to put our trust in Jesus and we can do this because we know Him through what the Bible teaches us about Him. The thing to do is to hear John's words and to act upon them, allowing his words to bring us face to face with Jesus and thus with God.

Suggestions for preaching

Sermon

Fellowship with God (1 John 1:1-4)

1. Introduction

- The joy of Fellowship
- The even greater joy of Fellowship with God

2. Fellowship made possible

- The appearance of the Word of Life, the One who has perfect fellowship with God
- The proclamation of the Word of Life, the way to fellowship with God for us

3. Entering Fellowship

- Taking John's words to heart
- Responding to John's words personally

Suggestions for teaching

Questions to help understand the passage

1. To what or to whom does the phrase 'that which was from the beginning' refer?
2. What titles are used in the passage to describe this One?
3. How does the passage emphasise the reality and the depth of the relationship between the Father and the Word of Life?
4. How does John stress the appearance in history of the Life?

5. What was the purpose of John's testimony about the appearing of the Life and thus of the apostolic preaching? What is surprising about the way this purpose is described in verse 3?
6. According to verse 4, why did John write his letter?
7. How does this purpose in writing connect with John's purpose in testifying to the appearing of the Life?

Questions to help apply the passage

1. Why is fellowship important?
2. What experiences of fellowship give you the most joy?
3. Do you think that it is possible for people to have fellowship with God? If so, then how? If not, then why not?
4. If someone asked you about whether it was possible to know Jesus personally, what would you answer? What reason would you give?
5. Why do you think a relationship with Jesus matters according to this passage?
6. What does this passage teach us about our goal in reading or teaching 1 John?