

1 JOHN 1:1-4

INTRODUCTION

This letter is written to help the readers to have an assurance of their salvation (1 John 5:13). It was written to help believers to know that they know that they are saved. Why was it necessary to write this letter, why was there an apparent lack of assurance of salvation? There was a group within the church or churches that John is writing to who had left the church presumably to start their own (1 John 2:19).

This group left because they came to a different understanding of what the Christian faith was about. This had caused a crisis in the church or churches and so John writes this letter to help the remaining church to think clearly on what we might call today gospel issues.

1. THE BACKGROUND TO THIS LETTER

Now I want to explore further the background of this book before we launch into it. First of all I have already said that John wrote this letter, but if you read carefully through this letter you will not find any mention of John's name. In fact it is not strictly true to call this a letter for it does not have the usual characteristics of a letter. It does not have the writers name and there is no mention of its recipients. Therefore this epistle is more like a sermon or a pastoral tract written to resolve a particular difficulty. It was probably written to several churches in Asia Minor. Why do most scholars believe that John wrote this address? From the very earliest time in church history John has been the accepted writer of this tract. We have clear evidence that John is accepted as the writer of this epistle from as early as the second and third centuries.

People like Tertullian, Origen and Clement of Alexandria all accepted Johannine authorship

Now although this does not prove John as author, this sort of external evidence cannot be easily pushed aside as they lived closer to the time of John than we did. However it is when we look more closely at the book itself that we are led to the conclusion that John is the author. The opening sentence of the book is very similar in style and content to the opening sentence of the gospel of John. Like the gospel of John this book is written in very simple Greek and it has many parallel thoughts and expressions with John's Gospel.

What was the error that caused this group of people to leave the church and caused John to be concerned enough to write this tract. Now like all the New Testament letters it is not easy to pinpoint exactly the heresy that was being proclaimed, we often have to read between the lines as the heresy is often implied by what is said. It seems that the false teachers who broke away from the church claimed a special anointing (charisma) of the Holy Spirit, by which they had been given true knowledge of God (2:20 & 27). This special knowledge became the centre of their distinctive beliefs and lifestyle.

Eventually this sort of teaching developed during the 2nd Century into a movement known as Gnosticism. John's concern in this tract is to emphasise and define what is a true knowledge of God.

What this group were doing is saying that unless you have this anointing of the Holy Spirit this special knowledge then you are inferior and do not understand fully the gospel. This led to this group basing their beliefs on special knowledge rather than real historical facts. As this teaching developed we know that one of their central beliefs was that matter is essentially evil because the world is evil and corrupt therefore all matter is evil.

How this belief when worked out in practise meant that they denied the incarnation of Christ (1 John 4:2-3), for how could the God of glory live in an impure body. Often such teaching claimed that Jesus did not really become man he only seemed to have a human form. John is clear about such teaching he calls people who promote this teaching liars (2:4, 22 & 4:20). This is why John starts this letter with a clear statement regarding the historical fact of Jesus who bodily lived in this world. To this opening sentence let us give our attention.

2. FOUNDATIONAL FACTS (vs. 1-2)

When a false teaching arises in a church or when a division is caused in a church because of false teaching what should we do. Well we have a fine example here; we should go back to the foundational principles of the gospel. This is what John does here. John reminds his readers that Jesus (Word of Life) who is God (was there from the beginning) has appeared in human flesh (v 2). This is the doctrine of the incarnation, God revealed himself in human flesh.

God has revealed himself in creation (Romans 1:20), he has revealed himself more fully in His written word, but God's final and most complete revelation of himself is found in Jesus (John 14:9).

It is typical John to call Jesus the Word for that is how he opens his gospel (John 1:1); here he is described as the Word of life. Why is Jesus called the word of life? Well our words reveal what we are like to others; we learn what others are like by their words to us. It is people's words that reveal what people think and how they feel. In a similar way Jesus as the Word reveals to us the mind and heart of God. Jesus is God's living communication to mankind, that's why if you want to know what God is like then look at Jesus, study his life, words attitudes and passions and we will know something of what God is like. Jesus described himself as the Life for all life comes from him both physical and spiritual. To know Jesus Christ is to have life and it is to know God.

Jesus as the Word of life was there at the beginning, go back as far as you can in your mind and Jesus Christ was present. This same Jesus who was present at the beginning of everything is the same one who has come into this world, who has been revealed to us. How do we know that Jesus actually came into our world lived, and died?

We have the testimony of John and the rest of the apostles. They heard Jesus speak and teach, they saw him with their own eyes, 'looked at' carries the idea of a fixed gaze; they could calmly study this person called Jesus. They could speak to him and touch him just like every other human being of their day and as a result they now proclaim what they saw, heard and touched. The false teachers said that Jesus just seemed to have a body some even claimed that Jesus was like a ghost but the testimony of the apostles tell us what they saw, heard and touched was a real person called Jesus. The conclusion of the disciples was that Jesus was fully human; he was a real person who really lived.

Now the question that this raised for the readers of this letter is who do they believe? The eyewitness accounts about Jesus or do they believe the teaching of the false teachers who probably never saw or heard Jesus. This is how you counteract all false teaching you go back to basics. You go back to the eyewitness accounts of Jesus life and teaching. Now when people claim that Jesus never lived, what they are saying is that they are rejecting the testimonies of those who claimed to have seen him heard him and touched him.

This is totally silly thing to do. If someone witnesses a car accident and then tells you, do you believe them?

If others tell you that they witnessed the same car accident and describe similar things to you, then you would be silly to reject that the accident ever happened. Yet that is what people do with the eyewitness accounts of Jesus. They say he didn't exist although to be honest few say that but many say that he did exist but that he was only a good moral teacher, a good example but not who Christians say he is the Saviour from sin. When people do that and many do say that today then what they are saying is that they do not believe the eyewitness accounts of Jesus, for Jesus is clearly presented as the Saviour from sin.

Unless he is your Saviour then you too do not believe the evidence presented by the eyewitnesses for your actions are saying that you do not believe that He is the Saviour from sin if he is not your Saviour. People who see Jesus usually see him as just a man and not as being proclaimed here both God and man, fully divine yet fully human. To deny the divine nature of Christ has serious implications. Jesus had to be divine as well as fully human in order to pay the full penalty for sin.

Unless Jesus was fully human he could not have died in the sinners place and paid the price that sin demanded. (Hebrews 2:14-17). Jesus had to become fully man in order to be like us in every way and as our representative head he obeyed and fulfilled the law of God in every way. In doing so he became an acceptable sacrifice for our sin, He became our substitute.

If Jesus was not both divine and human he could not have been our mediator. Sin separates us from God we needed someone to come between God and ourselves in order to bring us to God. We needed a mediator who could represent us to God and who could represent God to us. Jesus is the only person who fulfilled such a requirement (1 Timothy 2:5).

Salvation is from the Lord and all of scripture explains again and again that no man can save himself, no mere human being can save human beings only God by becoming one with us in humanity could do it. That is why He had to come and take the penalty for sin upon himself in the person of Jesus.

So you see if Jesus is not fully God and man we have no salvation and according to John anyone who denies the deity and humanity of Jesus does not know God (1 John 2:23) but the false teachers were claiming to know God. Let's be very clear about this those groups today who deny the deity and humanity of Christ are not Christian.

The way to find out whether a church or group is true or false is to go back to the foundational facts of the Lord Jesus Christ. To be wrong about Jesus is to be wrong about salvation. These false teachers claimed they knew God because they were given a special knowledge of God, John says they do not know God but those who believe in the name of the Son of God have eternal life (1 John 5:13). But of course knowledge of foundational truth is no good unless it is applied.

3. THE BLESSINGS OF BELIEVING FOUNDATIONAL TRUTHS (vs. 3-4)

John says that the apostles proclaimed this foundational truth about Christ so that three things might happen in the lives of the readers of this letter.

a) That they may have fellowship with God through Jesus (v 3) – The word 'fellowship' is an interesting one. It was used in classical Greek as a favourite expression for the marriage relationship. The most intimate bond between human beings, it is particularly appropriate to describe the Christian's personal relationship with God. It also was used of a partnership and has the idea of having something in common.

So here John says what he saw, heard and touched he proclaimed to others so that they may have fellowship a close intimate and personal relationship with God.

This comes through Christ for by having fellowship with Christ you have fellowship with God. This is why truth matters; only truth when applied brings someone into a proper relationship with God the Father through God the Son. That's why every true church must defend the truth for what is at stake is salvation, fellowship with God. These foundational facts and truths must be proclaimed so that others may come to have fellowship with God and it is the church's task to proclaim these truths.

b) That they might have fellowship with Other Believers (v 3) – Here is another reason why John proclaimed the foundational facts about Jesus. He wanted to have fellowship with God but in having fellowship with God they are brought into a relationship with other believers who have fellowship with God. Fellowship is having something in common; believers who apply the foundational facts about Jesus to their lives are brought into fellowship with God and automatically are brought into fellowship with others who are in fellowship with God.

But I want us to notice that unity for that is what we are talking about is based on acceptance of certain foundational facts. You cannot have fellowship or unity with others who do not believe the same foundational facts as you do. The modern ecumenical movement will always fail on this basis, you can only have fellowship with those who have fellowship with God and only those who accept and apply foundational facts about Jesus have such a fellowship with God.

If you are a Christian then you are in fellowship with God through Jesus Christ and this means that you are in fellowship with every true believer no matter what church they may go to or whatever their theological persuasion may be. Do our lives reflect real and meaningful fellowship with others? Do we seek to cultivate true fellowship between ourselves or are we so independent in our thinking that we have little meaningful fellowship with anyone?

c) That they might bring joy to the Apostles (v 4). There is a difficulty in deciding whether this should read, 'our joy' or 'your joy.' If we take it that the NIV is right then John says that the apostles joy is made complete when they witness the response to the foundational facts that they proclaimed. There is no greater joy to a preacher or to any Christian than to see people respond to truth, which has been proclaimed. There is no greater joy than to enjoy fellowship with others who have applied the truths about Jesus in their own lives. It was worth it as far as John and the other Apostles were concerned when they saw the church respond to the foundational truths and when they saw them remain steadfast and grow in those truths.

There is no greater joy in a church than to see people accept and grow in the truths of the gospel. There is rejoicing in heaven over sinners repenting but there should also be joy in the church when sinners come to faith and then continue in that faith. If we want to experience this joy then we must belong to a church that is proclaiming these great truths and praying that God may bring people into fellowship with himself through Jesus and as a result into fellowship of his church

AMEN.