

1—3 John

REFORMED EXPOSITORY COMMENTARY

A Series

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1—3 John

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To New Covenant Church, Naperville, Illinois

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SERIES INTRODUCTION

In every generation there is a fresh need for the faithful exposition of God's Word in the church. At the same time, the church must constantly do the work of theology: reflecting on the teaching of Scripture, confessing its doctrines of the Christian faith, and applying them to contemporary culture. We believe that these two tasks—the expositional and the theological—are interdependent. Our doctrine must derive from the biblical text, and our understanding of any particular passage of Scripture must arise from the doctrine taught in Scripture as a whole.

We further believe that these interdependent tasks of biblical exposition and theological reflection are best undertaken in the church, and most specifically in the pulpits of the church. This is all the more true since the study of Scripture properly results in doxology and praxis—that is, in praise to God and practical application in the lives of believers. In pursuit of these ends, we are pleased to present the Reformed Expository Commentary as a fresh exposition of Scripture for our generation in the church. We hope and pray that pastors, teachers, Bible study leaders, and many others will find this series to be a faithful, inspiring, and useful resource for the study of God's infallible, inerrant Word.

The Reformed Expository Commentary has four fundamental commitments. First, these commentaries aim to be *biblical*, presenting a comprehensive exposition characterized by careful attention to the details of the text. They are not exegetical commentaries—commenting word by word or even verse by verse—but integrated expositions of whole passages of Scripture. Each commentary will thus present a sequential, systematic treatment of an entire book of the Bible, passage by passage. Second, these commentaries are unashamedly *doctrinal*. We are committed to the Westminster Confession

Series Introduction

of Faith and Catechisms as containing the system of doctrine taught in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. Each volume will teach, promote, and defend the doctrines of the Reformed faith as they are found in the Bible. Third, these commentaries are *redemptive-historical* in their orientation. We believe in the unity of the Bible and its central message of salvation in Christ. We are thus committed to a Christ-centered view of the Old Testament, in which its characters, events, regulations, and institutions are properly understood as pointing us to Christ and his gospel, as well as giving us examples to follow in living by faith. Fourth, these commentaries are *practical*, applying the text of Scripture to contemporary challenges of life—both public and private—with appropriate illustrations.

The contributors to the Reformed Expository Commentary are all pastor-scholars. As pastor, each author will first present his expositions in the pulpit ministry of his church. This means that these commentaries are rooted in the teaching of Scripture to real people in the church. While aiming to be scholarly, these expositions are not academic. Our intent is to be faithful, clear, and helpful to Christians who possess various levels of biblical and theological training—as should be true in any effective pulpit ministry. Inevitably this means that some issues of academic interest will not be covered. Nevertheless, we aim to achieve a responsible level of scholarship, seeking to promote and model this for pastors and other teachers in the church. Significant exegetical and theological difficulties, along with such historical and cultural background as is relevant to the text, will be treated with care.

We strive for a high standard of enduring excellence. This begins with the selection of the authors, all of whom have proved to be outstanding communicators of God's Word. But this pursuit of excellence is also reflected in a disciplined editorial process. Each volume is edited by both a series editor and a testament editor. The testament editors, Iain Duguid for the Old Testament and Daniel Doriani for the New Testament, are accomplished pastors and respected scholars who have taught at the seminary level. Their job is to ensure that each volume is sufficiently conversant with up-to-date scholarship and is faithful and accurate in its exposition of the text. As series editors, we oversee each volume to ensure its overall quality—including excellence of writing, soundness of teaching, and usefulness in application. Working together as an editorial team, along with the publisher, we are devoted to ensuring that these are the best commentaries that our gifted authors can

provide, so that the church will be served with trustworthy and exemplary expositions of God's Word.

It is our goal and prayer that the Reformed Expository Commentary will serve the church by renewing confidence in the clarity and power of Scripture and by upholding the great doctrinal heritage of the Reformed faith. We hope that pastors who read these commentaries will be encouraged in their own expository preaching ministry, which we believe to be the best and most biblical pattern for teaching God's Word in the church. We hope that lay teachers will find these commentaries among the most useful resources they rely on for understanding and presenting the text of the Bible. And we hope that the devotional quality of these studies of Scripture will instruct and inspire each Christian who reads them in joyful, obedient discipleship to Jesus Christ.

May the Lord bless all who read the Reformed Expository Commentary. We commit these volumes to the Lord Jesus Christ, praying that the Holy Spirit will use them for the instruction and edification of the church, with thanksgiving to God the Father for his unceasing faithfulness in building his church through the ministry of his Word.

Richard D. Phillips
Philip Graham Ryken
Series Editors

PREFACE

In his *Autobiography*, Mark Twain tells a number of interesting stories about the curious events surrounding his life, most of which are drenched in typical Twain wit. A few stories, however, show some of the sober realities of his tumultuous times and travels. One such story is that of an old African medicine man from the island of Mauritius. This man alone had a cure for a rare “child’s disease.” Whenever parents were desperate for a cure, they would come to him and beg for his life-saving “herb medicine,” a potion that had been passed down from his father and grandfather. He always gladly complied. This dependence, however, had a dark side, for he refused to share the secret formula. As this man neared death, the islanders grew frightful. They feared that he would “die without divulging it.” Then what would happen to their dying children? Those who survived him would surely not survive the disease.¹

In John’s letters we find a similar but more generous scenario. The last surviving apostle does not stubbornly suppress his secret; instead, he freely and graciously leaves with the next generation the mystery of the life-saving message of the gospel. Writing fifty to sixty years after Christ’s resurrection,² John reveals to the churches in and around the city of Ephesus (those churches then under his apostolic oversight) the central ingredients of “the word of life” (1 John 1:1).

1. Recounted in Mark Twain, *Autobiography of Mark Twain*, ed. Charles Neider (New York: Harper-Perennial, 1990), 11.

2. While no “temporal indicators are given” and “no explicit geographical” location named, “if we care to assign John’s Letters to a particular historical milieu at all, it seems warranted to think of them as reflecting conditions in the region of Ephesus in the closing decades of the first century.” Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 17. Based on patristic sources, we know that John lived and ministered in Ephesus between A.D. 70 and 100, with 1 John likely written between A.D. 80 and 90.

Preface

After Christ's ascension, the apostles planted the seed of the gospel in Asia Minor, and as it grew by God's grace, this seed sprouted into many churches. Yet shortly after those churches began to flourish, impostors infiltrated them, seeking to sever them from their life-giving connection with the apostles.³ This chopping at the root of apostolic teaching and authority led many people within the church to question the content of the faith and its connection with the apostles. *Whom* are we to believe? *What* are we to believe?

John's letters were written, in part, to answer such concerns. To the question "Whom were they to believe—these new teachers or the old apostles?" John emphatically answers, "*The apostles*—only those witnesses who have seen, heard, and touched Jesus." To the question "What are they to believe?" John confidently asserts, "*The apostolic message*—'concerning the word of life'—the appearance of the eternal Son of God in the flesh."

Therefore, John had two main purposes for writing these epistles. His first purpose was pastoral. Some scholars have argued that John's central purpose is the final imperative in 1 John ("Keep yourselves from idols," 1 John 5:21) or the first indicative ("God is light," 1:5). But John explicitly states four purposes for writing (1:3, 4; 2:1; 5:13), and my view is that the last summarizes the overall message best. The authorial intent involves knowledge. It is not some secret, Gnostic-like knowledge, but knowledge of "eternal life" for those "who believe in the name of the Son of God" (5:13). It is the assurance of faith. John is writing, as James Montgomery Boice summarizes, "to lead those who already believe to a deeper understanding of the faith and to confidence in that which they already possess."⁴

He also writes, as mentioned, with a polemical purpose.⁵ As he states in 1 John 2:26, "I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you" (cf. Acts 20:28–30). Throughout the three letters, these twin

3. According to Revelation, there were two groups of leaders in Ephesus: those who called themselves apostles and truly were apostles and "those who call[ed] themselves *apostles* and [were] not" (Rev. 2:2). Throughout John's epistles, the true apostle addresses these "apostles" who are "not." He calls them "antichrists" (1 John 2:18), "false prophets" (4:1), and "deceivers" (2 John 7).

4. James Montgomery Boice, *The Epistles of John: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), 12.

5. As John R. W. Stott notes: "It is not a theological treatise written in the academic peace of a library, but a tract for the times, called forth by a particular and urgent situation in the Church. This situation concerns the insidious propaganda of certain false teachers." *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 41.

purposes intertwine. From his polemical concerns (i.e., the content of the false teaching) arises John's pastoral counsel (i.e., his corrective message). For example, to the impostors' "gospel" that is contrary to what the Ephesians received (see Gal. 1:9), John upheld the necessity of belief in Jesus' incarnation and obedience to his commandments, especially that of brotherly love. True Christian disciples "live in the light ([1 John] 1:5–2:29) as children of God (3:1–5:13)."⁶

Following many commentators before me, I will explain John's letters by agreeing with Robert Law's classic thesis that John presents us with "three cardinal tests" by which we may judge whether we possess eternal life or not.⁷ The first test is theological: we must believe that Jesus is the Son of God (1 John 3:23; 5:5, 10, 13; 2 John 3, 9; cf. 3 John 1–4), the Christ come in the flesh (1 John 4:2; 2 John 7). The second test is moral: we must obey God's commandments (e.g., 1 John 2:1–6; 2 John 6). The third test is social: we must love others (e.g., 1 John 2:10; 2 John 5; 3 John 5).

Moreover, in line with the healthy balance contained in the Westminster Standards, I will approach John's letters by acknowledging both that "no mere man since the fall is able in this life perfectly to keep the commandments of God, but doth daily break them in thought, word, and deed" (Westminster Shorter Catechism [WSC] A. 82) *and* that obedience marks the Christian life:

They, who are once effectually called, and regenerated, having a new heart, and a new spirit created in them, are further sanctified, really and personally, through the virtue of Christ's death and resurrection, by his Word and Spirit dwelling in them: the dominion of the whole body of sin is destroyed, and the several lusts thereof are more and more weakened and mortified; and they more and more quickened and strengthened in all saving graces, to the practice of true holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord. (Westminster Confession of Faith [WCF] 13.1)

Boice summarizes the balance in this way: "The life of God within makes obedience to the commands possible, and the love the Christian has for God and for other Christians makes this obedience desirable."⁸

6. Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, rev. ed., Word Biblical Commentary (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), 16.

7. *The Tests of Life* (1909).

8. Boice, *The Epistles of John*, 127.

Preface

These sermons were originally preached at New Covenant Church in Naperville, Illinois. Because I have accepted a call to lecture at Queensland Theological College in Brisbane, Australia, 1–3 John was my last sermon series at the church I planted nearly a decade ago. Thank you, NCC, for allowing me to serve you. Thank you for your persistent eagerness to have the Bible opened, explained, and applied. May you continue in “the practice of true holiness.”

≈ 1–3 *John*

A GOSPEL-TRANSFORMED LIFE

1

APOSTOLIC FELLOWSHIP

1 John 1:1–4

That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. (1 John 1:3)

Tongue twisters are my archenemy. I cannot say, and I no longer attempt to say, phrases such as “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,” “How can a clam cram in a clean cream can?,” “Send toast to ten tense stouts’ ten tall tents,” and “Unique New York, unique New York, you know you need unique New York.”

While the opening verses in 1 John are not tongue twisters, they do present us with an “abrupt,” “exceedingly complex,” “syntactically convoluted,” “frequently ambiguous,” “complicated interweaving” of “stammer[ing],” “infuriatingly obscure” “‘insider’ language,” as a compilation of commentators puts it,¹ or, more plainly, “a grammatical tangle,” as C. H. Dodd

1. “Abrupt” comes from John Calvin (quoted in Robert W. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament [Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008], 31); “exceedingly complex” from C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, Moffatt New Testament Commentary (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1946), 1; “syntactically convoluted” from Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 31; “frequently ambiguous” from John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 126; “complicated interweaving” from H. J. Holtzmann (quoted in Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 31n1); “stammer[ing]” from Martin Luther’s phrase “language [that] is altogether childlike; it stammers rather than speaks” (“Lectures on the First Epistle of St. John,” in *The Catholic Epistles*, vol. 30 of *Luther’s Works*, trans. and ed. Jaroslav Pelikan and W. A. Hansen [St. Louis: Concordia, 1972], 221); “infuriatingly obscure” from Raymond E. Brown (quoted in Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 31); and “‘insider’ language” from Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 126.

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bemoaned.² We wonder: *What is “which,” and who is “we,” and what does “we” have to say about “which” to “you”?* We wonder whether we have jumped into a Dr. Seuss book.

Admittedly, the pronouns can be perplexing in this opening sentence that runs rhythmically for nearly three verses and includes a parenthesis.³ Yet the message itself is plain enough: divine fellowship demands apostolic fellowship. Put metaphorically, if we want to hold the hand of God (stay in fellowship with him), we must hold the apostles’ hands (stay in fellowship with their God-appointed and God-approved testimony concerning Jesus Christ).

With that message in mind, I want to untangle this strange but straightforward text by implementing the odd but accurate questions I presented above, the first of which is “What is ‘which’?”

WHAT IS “WHICH”?

First John is a letter. Or is it a short sermon, an encyclical, a tractate, or some sort of theological manifesto? Whatever its precise genre, it is a short writing that begins without a beginning (i.e., there is no “from John to Gaius in Ephesus, grace and peace in Christ”) by beginning, “That which was from the beginning” (1 John 1:1). Some Bible translations hide this initial ambiguity by starting verse 1 with the verb found in verses 2 and 3, “we proclaim.” Thus, it is rendered “We proclaim to you” (NLT) or “We declare to you” (NRSV). The English Standard Version (ESV) wisely left the original alone, since the ambiguity is likely intentional. Like the reader of a good mystery novel, we have to wait until the end, or nearly the end (the very end of verse 3!), to solve the riddle. Who or what, then, is the “that which”? Five times in verses 1–3 we find the Greek word *ho*, rendered “which” in the ESV.⁴ “That *which* was from the beginning, *which* we have heard, *which* we have seen . . . , *which* we looked upon . . . [,] *which* we have seen and heard” (vv. 1, 3).

The word *which* is a neuter singular relative pronoun, thus pointing us to the Father’s Son, Jesus Christ (1 John 1:3), as the answer to the ques-

2. Dodd, quoted in John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1976), 61.

3. Painter, 1, 2, and 3 *John*, 127.

4. The “which” in verse 2 is a different Greek word, one that, nevertheless, modifies the same reality or person.

tion “what is ‘what’?” or “who is ‘ho’?” That deduction was reached not directly from the grammar but by common sense and a basic grasp of John’s style and vocabulary. Grammatically, the neuter word *which* (*ho*) cannot connect with the masculine word *word* (*logos*) or the feminine word *life* (*zōē*). It can, however, connect with the neuter word *message* (*angelia*) in verse 5 (cf. 3:11). But in verses 1–2, it is surely not the gospel message that was “seen” and “touched.” It might be, as some have suggested,⁵ that John uses the neuter for Jesus to encompass both the divine man (Jesus) and the divine message (about Jesus). Whatever the case may be, it is certainly true that in John’s Gospel the words *word* and *life* are used to represent Jesus. Moreover, it is not uncommon for John to use the neuter for the masculine gender (e.g., John 3:5a with 5b; 1 John 5:4 with 5).⁶ Thus, the “which” is God incarnate. Or perhaps it is better to say: he who “was from the beginning” and is “the word of life” is God’s Son, the man Jesus.

With this mystery solved, let us delve into it deeper. Why call Jesus “that which was from the beginning” and “the word of life” (1 John 1:1)? Both phrases are brimming with theological significance. The phrase “from the beginning” is used eight times in 1 John (cf. 2 John 5–6), and it has a few different connotations based on its context. For example, in 3:8 we read that “the devil has been sinning from the beginning.” This means something like “he has always sinned and continues to do so.”⁷ Or “from the beginning” refers back to Genesis 3. In 1 John 2:7, 24, and 3:11, we read of Jesus’ love command as being “from the beginning,” namely, from the time that Jesus gave it or the time that John’s recipients first received it. The way “from the beginning” is used in 1:1 could speak of the event of the incarnation, Jesus’ ministry after his baptism, the apostolic proclamation of his teachings, the absolute beginning of the universe (as in 2:13–14), or the time before creation when Jesus was the preincarnate *logos*. I take the last reference to be correct, namely, that John’s “from the beginning” is essentially the same as his declaration: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,

5. For example, “The term *that* [*which*, esv] is broader than the word *who*, for it includes the person and message of Jesus Christ.” Simon J. Kistemaker, “Exposition of the Epistles of John,” in *James, Epistles of John, Peter, and Jude* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), 234.

6. As noted by Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: Introduction and Commentary*, trans. R. Fuller and I. Fuller (New York: Crossroad, 1992), 57. For further examples, see *ibid.*, 57n26.

7. Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 120.

and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God” (John 1:1–2).⁸ In terms of Habakkuk’s question to Yahweh in Habakkuk 1:12 (NIV), “O LORD, are you not *from everlasting?*” (LXX,⁹ *ap’ archēs*), Jesus replies, “Yes, *I am!*” Jesus existed before creation and enjoyed (as he now continues to enjoy; see 1 John 1:3) an eternally intimate fellowship with the Father.

The phrase “word of life” is in tune with this high Christological note, teaching that the eternal, preexistent, fully divine Son came into the world as the “*definitive revelation* of God.”¹⁰ He is the voice, image, and embodiment of God. Through him, God is made audible (cf. Heb. 1:2–3), visible (cf. Col. 1:15), and touchable (cf. Mark 3:10). Also through him, we are given “life” (1 John 1:1), even “eternal life” (v. 2; cf. John 17:3). Rudolf Schnackenburg says it beautifully: the incarnation is “the descent of the life eternal into the world of humankind alienated from God, the invasion of the absolute, indestructible power of life into this transitory cosmos, destined as it was to perdition (1 John 2:17).”¹¹ Are you concerned about death and damnation? You should be. We are all doomed to die and then face the judgment. So, then, how can anyone escape? Is there deliverance? Where? How? Who? Come hear, see, and touch Jesus.

WHO IS “WE”?

But how are we to hear, see, and touch Jesus when he no longer lives on earth? How can we behold the eternal and ascended Lord? John answers through the “we” of verses 1–3. Here our attention turns to our second question, “Who is ‘we?’”

The English pronoun “we” is used six times in the first three verses (“we,” “our,” and “us” are used eleven times!): “That . . . which *we* have heard, which *we* have seen with our eyes, which *we* looked upon and have touched

8. Clement of Alexandria summarizes the Christian consensus: “For when he says ‘which was from the beginning’ he is referring to the generation of the Son which has no beginning, because he exists coeternal with the Father. Therefore the word *was* signifies eternity, just as the Word himself, that is, the Son, which is one with the Father in equality of substance, is eternal and unmade.” “Adumbrations,” in *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, ed. Gerald Bray, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, New Testament 11 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 166.

9. LXX is shorthand for the Septuagint, an early Greek translation of the Old Testament.

10. Gary M. Burge, *Letters of John*, NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 58.

11. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 60.

with our hands” (1 John 1:1); “And *we* have seen it” (v. 2); “that which *we* have seen and [we] heard *we* proclaim also to you” (v. 3). This “we” can be inclusive: it means the writer along with his readers. John uses “we” like that in verses 6–10, such as in verse 9, “If we confess our sins.”¹² But in verses 1–3, as well as verse 5, John uses “we” exclusively, as in “we” and not “you” the readers. The emphasis and shift are obvious. There is something or someone (namely, “that which was from the beginning,” v. 1) that a certain group of people (the “we”) have heard, seen, and touched that is now being proclaimed to others (the “you” of verse 3). Think of it this way. Our text covers three periods: first, the timeless preexistence of Christ; second, the era of eyewitness testimony; third, the occasion when John wrote the letter and its intended audience received it.¹³ The “we” is the key to the second and third eras.

While we can identify the “we” as generically “the authorized teachers of the Church”¹⁴ or “the authoritative bearers of tradition,”¹⁵ it is simplest to call them “the apostles.” Here is where the matter of authorship comes to bear. If the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, was not the author, we have a small problem,¹⁶ for the person writing verses 1–4 claims apostolic authority. In some ways, this prologue announces the same authority with which Paul opened his letter to the Galatians: “Paul, an apostle—*not from* men nor through man, *but through* Jesus Christ and God the Father” (Gal. 1:1). The author of 1 John presents himself not only as one of the few people who saw Jesus (there were more than five hundred people who witnessed the resurrected Jesus, 1 Cor. 15:6), but as someone especially commissioned to

12. Also note that only in 1:4 does John write “we are writing.” “From here on reference is in the first person singular, ‘I write’ (2:1, 7, 12, 13 [2×], all in the present tense . . . ; then ‘I wrote’ (2:14 [3×], 21, 26; 5:13), all in the aorist.” Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 123.

13. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 31. Cf. Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, 49.

14. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, 11.

15. Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, 123, 128.

16. For an excellent defense of Johannine authorship, see Andreas Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2009), 783–90. Also note Yarbrough’s and D. A. Carson’s summaries of their findings: “There is ample reason to suppose that he [the author] was John son of Zebedee.” Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 32. “In line with the majority view among Christian students during the past two thousand years (though out of step with today’s majority), I think it highly probable that John the apostle wrote the Fourth Gospel and the three letters that traditionally bear his name.” D. A. Carson, “The Johannine Writings,” in *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and Brian S. Rosner (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 132.

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proclaim the message about Jesus: “that which we have seen and heard [and “touched”! 1 John 1:1] we proclaim also to you” (1 John 1:3). He aligns himself with those few men who qualify to be apostles because they witnessed “all that he [Jesus] did” (Acts 10:39; cf. 1:21–22; Luke 1:2) and were “chosen by God as witnesses” (Acts 10:41). So, then, in sum, the “we” representing the “apostolic we,” as it is sometimes called, best explains the language of ear, eye, and hand testimony, as well as the whole authoritative tone of the letter.

WHAT DOES “WE” SAY ABOUT “WHICH” TO “YOU”?

This introductory study to John’s first epistle has centered on small words with big ideas behind them. Having looked at “which” and “we,” we come now to “you.” Our final question is: “What does ‘we’ have to say about ‘which’ to ‘you’?” The answers are found by finding another small word—*hina* in Greek, “so that” in English. Each “so that” of 1 John 1:3 and 4 is joined to a subjective verb (highlighted in bold below), that is, a verb that expresses purpose or intent:

that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, *so that you too may have fellowship with us*; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things *so that our joy may be complete*. (1 John 1:3–4)

The medieval historian and exegete Venerable Bede wrote of 1 John 1:3: “John shows quite clearly that those who want to have fellowship with God must first of all be joined to the church.”¹⁷ That is part of the first answer to our third question. The point, however, is even more specific. John teaches that whoever wants to have fellowship with God must first be joined to the apostolic testimony about God incarnate. Thus, verse 3 can be amplified to read as follows: “That which we apostles have seen and heard we apostles proclaim also to you—those who have not seen and heard—so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.” The Jewish philosopher Martin Buber wrote of the “I” and “Thou” relationship between man and God. Man is the “I,” God the “Thou.” The text before us shows that the “we” and “you” relationship—“we”

17. Bede, “On 1 John,” in Bray, *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, 168.

being the apostles and “you” being all who believe in Christ on account of their message—must come before the “I” and “Thou.” I will put it this way: “You” are in Christ because of the apostolic “we.” Without this apostolic “we,” there is no you and me. Without the “holy, catholic, and *apostolic* church” (Nicene Creed),¹⁸ there is no “communion of the saints” (Apostles’ Creed). The good news of 1 John is that we have *koinōnia* (“fellowship”) with God through our *koinōnia* with one another (4:7–8, 11–12; 4:20–21; 5:1–3), a relationship that starts by aligning ourselves with the apostolic testimony. We align ourselves by holding to the New Testament as God’s authorized witness and faithfully participating in a local church that sits under the apostles’ teachings. Are we trusting God’s Word? Are we sitting under its teaching? Are we believing and doing what it says? Are we rejoicing with other believers in the salvation that it proclaims?

In Ephesians 2:19–21, Paul pours some concrete imagery around this idea of apostolic fellowship. He writes:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on *the foundation of the apostles* and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. (Cf. Eph. 3:4–5; Rev. 21:14)

As in Ephesians 2, so in 1 John 1 the image for Christian *koinōnia* (“fellowship” or “what we hold in common with each other”) is not sharing calories and caffeine after the service. Neither is it pie-in-the-sky pietism, sentimental spiritualism, or ecstasy for a few elite enthusiasts that is detached from apostolic testimony and teaching. Rather, the image is as hard as a rock but as soft and as warm as a human body, with its various indispensable members—its eyes and ears, its feet and hands (cf. 1 Cor. 12).

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Speaking of the human hand, perhaps you noticed how tactile this text is. Here John stresses not merely the material manifestation of the eternal God

18. I use the term *apostolic* not in the sense of succession but submission to the apostles’ oral and then written witness. The universal church at all times everywhere is to be “devoted . . . to the apostles’ teaching” (Acts 2:42).

incarnate but also the material testimony of the apostles. He adds “heard” and “touched” (which could be rendered as the very expressive “handled”) to his Gospel prologue—“The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory” (John 1:14). In this way, he reminds us of his Gospel, where the apostolic ear-, eye-, and hand-testimony was on full display.

Envision 1 John 1:1–3 as a courtroom scene. As the defendant, John takes the stand. The prosecuting attorney asks, “You claim that Jesus was a real man. Is that right?” “Yes, I affirm the historical Jesus,” John replies. “Are there any other witnesses to validate your claim?” “Certainly,” John smiles. “There are ten more than two” (cf. Deut. 19:15; Matt. 18:16). Soon the Twelve are put in the dock. “Did any of you *hear* this Jesus teach?” They all nod their heads. James says, “I sat through his Sermon on the Mount, his parables of the kingdom, his Olivet Discourse, his . . .” Simon the Zealot zealously interjects, “And I heard him say of *lawyers*, ‘Woe to you lawyers! For you have taken away the key of knowledge. You did not enter yourselves, and you hindered those who were entering’” (Luke 11:52). Matthias quips, “Sure, but I heard his seven woes to the scribes and Pharisees. Quite the sermon that was!” The lawyer shakes his head in dismay. “Enough! Let’s up the ante, shall we?” He continues, “But who has seen him? Did any of you *see* Jesus in the flesh?” They all nod again. “I saw him open a blind man’s eyes,” says Bartholomew. “I saw him turn over the tables in the temple,” Andrew adds. “Oh, yeah,” Philip interjects, “I saw him turn water into wine!” At this point, the prosecuting attorney shuffles a few papers, sits down, and utters, “No further questions, Your Honor.”

Then the Twelve’s attorney, Barrister Paraclete by name, walks over to the witnesses, folds his arms, winks, and begins his cross-examination: “I have only one question. We have heard testimony about hearing. But let’s be honest: we all know that hearing is not the surest sense. We have also heard testimony about seeing, but again, while more compelling, it is not enough to convince me. My question, then, is this: Did any of you *touch* this Jesus of Nazareth?” The heretics in the balcony, whom we will meet soon enough in our study of 1 John, shudder. James the son of Alphaeus says, “He washed my feet.” Matthew and Thaddeus say in unison, “Me, too.” They all say, “Me, too.” Peter says, “I touched his hand when he pulled me out of the stormy sea.” John says, “I laid my head against his chest at the Last Supper.” Then Thomas moves to the microphone.

The crowd mumbles beneath their breath, “Doubting Thomas, doubting Thomas, doubting Thomas.” But the other Eleven are filled with excitement. “They all touched,” Thomas begins, “his resurrected body.” The courtroom quiets. “And . . . I did, too.”

He then retells the dramatic story (now on official court record in John 20:24–28):

“When the others told me, ‘We have seen the Lord,’ I said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the mark of the nails, and place my finger into the mark of the nails, and place my hand into his side, I will never believe.’ You see, I wanted not only to see and hear, but also to touch, to place my finger into Christ’s wounds. Well, what happened? I got my wish. Eight days later, Jesus appeared to us. He stood among us and said, ‘Peace be with you.’ Then he approached me and said, ‘Thomas, put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and *place it in* my side. Do not disbelieve, but believe.’ I complied with Jesus’ finger-into-the flesh request, and needless to say, I doubted no more. My hesitancy turned into a hallelujah. I declared, ‘My Lord and my God!’

“Your Honor, ladies and gentlemen of the jury—along with these Eleven, I am an eye-, ear-, and hand-witness that the eternal and transcendent God became immanent and palpable!”

“I have no further questions,” Mr. Paraclete concludes.

The courtroom is abuzz. The judge pounds his gavel! He pounds it again. The verdict is clear. The apostolic victory cheer echoes throughout the chambers.

The prologue of 1 John instructs us that without the Twelve’s testimony, we are left groping in the dark about Jesus. Don’t underestimate their unique position and privilege. Before his resurrection, Jesus declared to them, “Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear. For truly, I say to you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see, and did not see it, and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matt. 13:16–17). After his resurrection, in all his appearances, our Lord stressed the necessity of their tangible witness. In Luke 24:38–39, for example, he said to them, “Why are you troubled, and why do doubts arise in your hearts? See my hands and my feet, that it is I myself. *Touch me*, and see.” Again, we stay in “touch” with the divine testimony concerning Jesus by staying in fellowship with the apostolic witness. Let us never let go of

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this God-appointed and God-approved hand! Let us hold on to it against all opposition to the truth.

Many summers ago, two Mormon missionaries knocked on my front door. On two successive Wednesday afternoons, we discussed the differences between the Church of Latter-day Saints and the apostolic church of Jesus Christ (historic orthodox Christianity). One of the issues I challenged them on was the historical viability of Mormonism. Namely, I questioned a few of the persons and places in the Book of Mormon that have no ancient or modern account to affirm their existence.

My fact-finding mission quickly frustrated them. In haste and apparent disgust, one of the young men replied, "Listen, I am a Mormon because I have faith." He paused, wiped his brow, and continued, "And I hope you would still believe in Christianity even if there was no historical evidence to support it." What do you make of that reply? It certainly fits the current postmodern mentality, and it does have a ring of piety to it. But since I am neither postmodern nor overly pietistic, I would have none of it. I immediately and emphatically stated that I would not believe in Christianity if there were no historical evidences to support its claims. I would not believe in Jericho and Jerusalem if there were no historical verification that such cities ever existed. I would not believe that Jesus walked on this earth and died on a cross unless there was proof. I would not believe that he rose from the dead unless eyewitnesses had actually heard his voice, seen his face, and touched his body.

The point I made to the Mormon missionaries still stands: Christian faith is not a leap in the dark. Our faith is factual. It is based on the facts of eyewitness testimony. So while it might sound super-spiritual to sing, "He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today! He walks with *me* and talks with *me* along life's narrow way. . . . You ask me how *I know* he lives? He lives within *my heart*,"¹⁹ apostolic piety sings a different tune. It sings of the fact of the living Christ on the basis of the testimony of those he walked with and talked with along life's narrow way. I know that he lives because of them.

Apostles' Joy

With his first "so that" phrase (1 John 1:3), John answers the question *what does "we" have to say about "which" to "you"?* by teaching that who-

19. Homer A. Rodeheaver, "He Lives" (1933).

ever wants to have fellowship with God must first be joined to the apostolic testimony concerning God incarnate. With his second “so that” phrase, he writes about the motive of joy: “And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete” (1 John 1:4).

At first glance, two details about this fourth verse strike me as odd. First, why does John use the first-person plural “we” (“we are writing”) when elsewhere in the letter he uses only the first-person singular (e.g., “I am writing,” 1 John 2:1, and “I write to you,” 2:21)? Did the Twelve sit down together and write chapter 1, and then John took it from there? That is highly unlikely, especially since at this time (A.D. 85–95), John might be the only surviving apostle. The answer can be seen in the three different ways in which John uses “we” in 1 John:

1. John uses “the *dissociative* ‘we’” in 1 John 1:1–3 as well as verse 5: “we apostles,” not “you nonapostles.”
2. Then in verse 4, he uses “‘we’ as a substitute for ‘I’” (close to “the royal we” in English): “we [John on behalf of the other apostles] write to you.”
3. Finally, in verses 6–10, he uses “the *associative* ‘we.’”²⁰ This “we” includes us (e.g., “If we say we [author(s) and reader(s)] have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth,” v. 6).

Next we turn our attention to the second oddity. I did not expect the “our”! I expected John to write: “And we are writing these things so that *your* [not *our*] joy may be complete.” It is strange enough that John would end his rooted-in-history prologue with a plea for an unfulfilled emotion. What does joy have to do with eyewitness testimony and apostolic fellowship? The oddity is enhanced when we ask, “What is John on about with his own *personal* joy?” That sounds self-centered. It was so off-putting a purpose statement that some scribe along the way, as he was copying the New Testament, deleted “our” and inserted “your.” This is called a *textual variant* or a *variant reading*. The variant reading is wrong (note especially

20. These three ways of talking about “the ‘we’ of authoritative testimony” come from Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses: The Gospels as Eyewitness Testimony* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2006), 371–72.

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2 John 12; cf. 1 Thess. 3:9), not only because our oldest and best manuscripts of the New Testament do not have it, but also because it is thematically off.

I'll illustrate. My joy as a parent is “full” (κῆν) or fuller—brought “into a state of completeness”²¹—when my children obey the Lord. I am full of joy when I obey the Lord. My joy is fuller when they also obey the Lord. Similarly, when John thinks of the Christians in or around Ephesus—whom he calls “my children” throughout this epistle (e.g., “my little children,” 2:1)—his joy is perfected when they are walking hand in hand with the apostolic testimony and teaching. That is his pastoral goal in this overtly pastoral love letter.

Yet there is a dark side to this end stress on joy. It “also constitutes a certain sober foreshadowing, like sunshine bathing a picnic while thunderheads boil up on the horizon.”²² John speaks of joy, knowing that the church or churches that he was writing to were on the verge of losing their theological, ethical, and social bearings, or had already lost them, because of “false prophets” (1 John 4:1), “antichrists” (2:18), and “deceivers” (2 John 7). These impostors were denying that Jesus had come in the flesh—that he had even had a human body to hear, see, and touch.

We will encounter these proto-Gnostics soon enough. For now, we are reminded that the incarnation is the foundation of our salvation. Rejoice in that! We are also reminded that, as Hilary of Arles summarized: “The fullness of joy comes when we are in *fellowship with the apostles*, as well as of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”²³ Let us also rejoice in that, as we continue to live and share our apostolic faith.

The Foundation of Christian Fellowship

In the prologue of John's first epistle, we have learned about apostolic fellowship: namely, that the unique and eternal fellowship between the Father and the Son that was manifested in the once-for-all, exclusive event of the incarnation, observed by the apostles at a particular point in history, has been through them extended to the universal church. Today when some-

21. Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 58–59.

22. Yarbrough, *1–3 John*, 43.

23. Hilary of Arles, “Introductory Commentary on 1 John,” in Bray, *James, 1–2 Peter, 1–3 John, Jude*, 168 (emphasis added).

one becomes a Christian, he or she “enters into this one ageless, universal fellowship—a fellowship springing from the Godhead, coursing through the apostles, and flowing through every genuine believer who has ever been or will ever be.”²⁴ We are now and eternally in living fellowship with the One who was “from the beginning.” That is a *koinōnia* worth celebrating! It is also a *koinōnia* worth living out. Let us not grow weary of holding on to Christ through holding on to the apostles and holding out to the world the joyful good news of our gospel.

24. Philip W. Comfort and Wendell C. Hawley, *1–3 John*, Cornerstone Biblical Commentary (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2007), 332.