

Prologue: The Subject Matter of First John

John begins by setting forth his subject, that which he and his colleagues declare and which is now put into writing. The prologue also indicates the authority by which he writes and the certainty of what he declares. It is the authority of a witness to the Christ.

The Thing Declared by Witnesses (3) Concerning the Word of Life (1)

The subject on which John writes is that which was declared by the witnesses (v. 3) concerning the word of life (v. 1). Pay close attention to the description. This message deals with:

1. *That which was from the beginning.* But what is meant by *the beginning*? The epistle speaks of the beginning in two senses. Sometimes reference is made to the absolute beginning (2:13f; 3:8). Some, therefore, think of the absolute beginning, as in the prologue to John (1:1). But the word is also used for the beginning in a relative sense, for what the readers had first learned from apostolic teachers: the “old commandment which you had from the beginning” (2:7); “that which you heard from the beginning” (2:24); “the message which you heard from the beginning” (3:11). See also Second John 5–6.

Which sense applies here? Two points make the second sense more probable. One is the other parallel clauses which describe the same thing. *That which was from the beginning* is also *that which we have heard, that which we have seen ... etc.* This parallelism seems to identify the beginning with the revelation made through Christ.

Then further, all of these clauses are connected with *concerning the word of life*. So, as that which we have heard, seen, beheld, and our hands handled concerned the word of life, so also that which is from the beginning was about the word of life. That connection also points to a relative rather than an absolute beginning, namely the beginning of the revelation through Christ.

So, with false teachers appearing among the Christians, setting forth new views of Christ, John takes his readers back to the beginning for the understanding of the truth. This new teaching is not true and never

has been true, not from the beginning. “From the beginning it has not been so,” as Jesus said about another matter (Matt. 19:8).

The remaining clauses all speak to the authority and certainty of that which was from the beginning:

2. *That which we have heard* ... but not just heard:

3. *That which we have seen with our eyes* ... our very own eyes ... but again, not just seen, but more:

4. *That which we beheld*. The Greek *theomai* is more than just seeing; it is to gaze upon with interest, almost perhaps: make a study of. But even that does not exhaust the experience of the witnesses, for John has one more clause to add:

5. ... *and our hands handled*. John is certainly referring to the post-resurrection experience of the once dead, but now alive Christ which is reported in Luke 24:39–40 and John 20:20, 25 & 27.

All five of these clauses are connected with the phrase ...

Concerning the Word of Life (1)

But should *Word* be capitalized (some versions), as having a personal reference, according to the usage in John 1:1, 14? Or does it mean *the message of life*, in which case the expression would have a parallel in Philippians 2:16?¹ Probably the latter is correct. In any case, the emphasis is on *life* (as manifested in the person Jesus Christ) rather than on *word*, and this will be the point which is elaborated and expounded upon in verse 2.

Life Elaborated and Expounded (2)

1. *John is plainly referring to the life manifested in Christ Jesus, which is given such emphasis in his Gospel:*

“In him was life; and the life was the light of men” (John 1:4).

“... even so must the Son of man be lifted up; that whosoever believes may in him have eternal life” (John 3:14–15).

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believes on him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John 3:16).

¹ Cf. Acts 5:20 which speaks of *all the words of this life*.

“He that believes on the Son has eternal life; ...” (John 3:36).

“For as the Father raises the dead and gives them life, even so the Son also gives life to whom he will” (John 5:21).

“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that hears my word, and believes him that sent me, has eternal life, and comes not into judgment, but has passed out of death into life. Verily, verily, I say unto you, The hour comes, and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God; and they that hear shall live. For as the Father has life in himself, even so gave he to the Son also to have life in himself: ...” (John 5:24–26).

The Gospel has many other such passages, of course, but notice the following particularly:

Jesus claims, “... the words that I have spoken unto you are spirit, and are life” (John 6:63b), and Peter was certainly listening, for when Jesus inquires whether the twelve may wish to abandon him as had the great mass of the crowd, “Simon Peter answered him, Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life” (John 6:68).

Finally, the claim of Jesus: “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6).

2. Then notice that *the author includes himself among those who are witnesses to the life in Christ*: “and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare unto you the life.”

3. *This life is then further defined* as “the eternal life (cf. John 6:40, 47–51, 58, 68; 8:51; 11:25–26), which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us.”

Plainly, John is referring to the manifestation of eternal life in Christ Jesus. It would not be an overstatement to call verses 1 & 2 a summary of the Gospel of John.

The Sentence Structure (of Verse 1) Resumed (in 3)

Observe four points on verse 3:

1. *That which we have seen and heard* summarizes verse 1.

2. That very thing, says the author, the experience of which was treated more fully in verse 1 and is now briefly summarized, is what *we declare to you also*.

3. The *purpose* for which John and his colleagues declare that which they have experienced as witnesses to such as the readers is then stated: “that you also may have fellowship with us.” The Greek *koinonia* (fellowship) is a partnership, a joint participation, a sharing in common. Thus the witnesses declare that which they have experienced to those who are not witnesses, so that the latter may share in the life which had been manifested to the witnesses.

4. The fellowship of the apostolic witnesses, into which the readers and other non-witnesses like them have been brought by the declaration of the witnesses, is then said to be nothing less than *a fellowship with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ*.

Thus the readers are introduced into fellowship with God by being brought into fellowship with the witnesses. Fellowship with the apostles is the means by which people are brought into fellowship with God. Many people think they can have fellowship with God while rejecting the apostolic testimony. (That is the view of Bishop Spong referred to in the preface, for example.) But the testimony of the apostles is the means by which people are brought into fellowship with the apostles, which is a fellowship with the Father and Son. There is simply no fellowship with God without fellowship with the apostolic witnesses.

The Testimony Put in Writing (4)

1. *And these things we write*, says John, referring to the things of which he has previously spoken: the things manifested, seen, heard and declared. Thus the things that made it possible for people to be brought into fellowship with the apostles, and hence to share in their fellowship with God, the Father and the Son, have now been put into writing; so that it is possible for people throughout the ages to have fellowship with God through the writings of the witnesses preserved in the New Testament documents. Praise the Lord! What a precious treasure is found in these ancient writings!

2. *The purpose for writing these things* is then stated: “that our joy may be made full.” It is the joy of a mission successfully accomplished.