

1 JOHN—WEEK 1

THE FOUNDATION



F. Michael Slay

A DEEP Study

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Cover Picture is by Jan van Eyck (1390–1441)

On display in Ghent at the St. Bavo Cathedral, it's a painting that looks like a statue.

In this opening section, John lays down the foundation of the faith, the foundation of the gospel, and the foundation of how we practice Christianity.

The foundation of the faith is that it's true—John saw and touched Jesus. The foundation of the gospel is that Jesus is light and the propitiation for our sins. The foundation of the practice of Christianity is fellowship (koinonia).

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1 John, Week 1 — The Foundation
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1 1 John 1:1 (ESV)

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—

Imagine that you're watching someone being cross-examined in court. The lawyer asks, "Did you actually see this?" The witness replies, "I saw it with my eyes and touched it with my hands."

Bam. It doesn't get more solid than that.

John's point in this verse is to say, in the strongest possible terms, that this actually, physically happened. We have seen (ἐώρακάμεν "eh-oh-rah-ka-men") with our eyes (ὀφθαλμοῖς "oph-thal-mois") and have touched (ἐψηλάφησαν "eps-ay-la-phay-sahn") with our hands (χεῖρες "keir-es").

John isn't confused. He isn't unsure. He knows what he saw. He saw Jesus. He even touched Him.

And what he saw and touched was, "*That which was from the beginning ... concerning the word of life.*" John is making a clear reference to the beginning of his gospel.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. — John 1:1 (ESV)

John's mention of touch is especially important. Much of First John is written to counter Docetism, an early heresy that denied that Jesus had a physical body.

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/docetic-heresy>

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Docetism>

This seems impossibly nutty to us. (What do they think Mary gave birth to?) But clarifying the fundamental Christian doctrines was one of the main challenges of the early church.

Theology is complicated; the concepts surely extend beyond human comprehension. The apostles worked hard to sort through various doctrines, including things like circumcision and whether Christians should eat a kosher diet.

But regular folks were even more challenged than the apostles. The bodily resurrection and ascension of Jesus was hard to conceive of. Many people tried to make it simple by explaining it away.

Modern Christians need to avoid trying to reinvent the wheel on these doctrines. The ancient creeds were written to set an easily memorized baseline that would keep them from getting confused.

Reciting these creeds is a great way to worship.

2 1 John 1:2–4 (ESV)

...the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—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.

The keys to this passage are the two purpose constructs in verses three and four. The purpose for what we declare to you is *that you also may have fellowship with us*. The purpose for why we are writing these things is *so that our joy may be complete*.

Notice how these two purposes connect. This is *so that you too may have fellowship with us ... so that our joy may be complete*.

The fellowship of the body of Christ, and the joy that goes with it, is how the gospel works in practice. It isn't some fringe benefit to make being a Christian more enjoyable; it's essential.

The Greek word translated as *fellowship* is *κοινωνία* (koi-no-nee-ah). This is more than just being pals; it's about deep friendship. It's rooted in the verb *κοινωνεω* (koi-no-neh-oh), which means to partner or share. Friends notice things that we don't notice about ourselves. When they act on what they've noticed, we grow in Christ. Iron sharpens iron.

And the middle part between those two purpose constructs is how this works— *our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*. From hearing what the apostles proclaim, we join in fellowship with them and with God.

That's what *koinonia* is all about. Without it, the church stagnates.

This is not to say that *koinonia* isn't fun; it is. In fact, one of the signs of a healthy church is people having fun together. This leads to an interesting point—church should be enjoyable.

Obviously, this can be taken too far. Entertainment is not the ultimate objective, but things like meals and baby showers and other fun activities are a good thing. *Koinonia* is an essential part of what the church is. You can teach the gospel with good food, good music, and even humor.

One of the slogans of Young Life is, "It's a sin to bore a kid with the gospel." Leaders evangelize through having good clean fun. The Young Life camps are crazy fun, and hundreds of kids make first time confessions of faith there every year. I know pastors who first came to Christ at a Young Life camp.

But Paul's point in this passage goes beyond the simple benefits of entertainment. Fellowship does more than just make things fun enough that folks stick around and listen to the message. It deepens friendships, which fosters growth in Christ. These deep friendships are the body of Christ firing on all eight cylinders.

Indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

3 1 John 1:5–10

This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin.

If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

To fully understand this passage, we need to be clear on what John means by, “walk in darkness,” as opposed to, “walk in the light as He is in the light.” What exactly is it that John wants us to avoid?

The second paragraph illuminates the first. John doesn’t mean we should be perfect; we’re not, and we mustn’t say that we are. So, what does *walk in the light* mean?

The standard answer is, “in the open,” and walking *in darkness* means, “hidden,” or, “in secret.” That fits this passage well. It fits other Bible passages too.

He reveals deep and secret things; He knows what is in the darkness, — Daniel 2:22a

“When I was with you daily in the temple, you did not try to seize Me. But this is your hour, and the power of darkness.” — Luke 22:53 (Jesus says this as He was seized in Gethsemane—before dawn.)

So, walking in the light means not hiding our activities—being the people we claim to be.

John is instructing his readers in the importance of being genuine.

We’re all familiar with the concept of hypocrisy. There’s nothing unusual or rare about people pretending to be better or more righteous than they are. Frankly, we all do it. This is what John means by, “walk in darkness.”

But this passage takes this concept to a more advanced level with the words, “we deceive ourselves.” Notice that it does not say, “If we **think** that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.”

No, by merely **saying** that we have no sin, we have started down the road to self-deception. Soon we will be thinking *that we have no sin*.

Deceiving others bounces back to us; we start to believe our own lies. We deceive ourselves and we don’t even know that we’re doing it.

When we think we’re fooling others, we’re the real fools.

4 1 John 2:1–6

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked.

First John dives into the great question of Christianity—how “perfect” are we expected to be? Today’s second paragraph starts out sounding like the standard is very high.

Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, “I know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him.

But that doesn’t seem to agree with the first paragraph. If Christians *keep His commandments* already, what’s the point of John writing *these things ... so that you may not sin*? (Yes, that is a purpose construct.)

And why give encouragement *if anyone sins*? Doesn’t the second paragraph imply that can’t happen?

This apparent contradiction is the logical foundation of the gospel. Yes, the standard is extremely high, and we fail to meet it, but there’s a solution.

He Himself is the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world.

We’re not perfect—not even close—but we’re forgiven.

In the 1960’s, noted psychiatrist Thomas Anthony Harris popularized the phrase “I’m OK – You’re OK.” His book by that title was on the New York Times best seller list for almost two years.

That’s a sad commentary of the confused state of our society. People bought the book hoping to find answers. Fat chance.

Instead, it led them directly away from the gospel. The gospel teaches people to be honest with themselves about their faults and offers them a solution.

The “I’m OK –You’re OK” philosophy teaches “self-help.” It’s designed to “heal” people in the sense that they feel better about themselves, but the fundamental issues are left untouched. Sin isn’t even recognized.

That just keeps things in the dark.

5 1 John 2:7–11

Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.

He who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.

This sounds a bit clumsy in English. Is John writing a new commandment or not?

Both. The word translated as *again* (παλιν “pah-lin”) carries a sense of “on the other hand.” John is writing an old command, but there’s a newness to it.

John explains the apparent contradiction by noting that the context is what has changed. The old command is effectively new *because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining.*

So, what is this old command now made new? Love.

And this isn’t about gooey sentimentality either. The word translated as *loves* (ἀγαπῶν aga-pone) means sacrificial love—putting another’s well-being above one’s own. Love your brother. Love your neighbor. Even love your enemy.

And, yes, Jesus was talking about this *from the beginning.*

Okay, but how is this related to light and darkness?

Simple, acts of love are acts of light because they don’t need to be hidden, while hatred lives in the dark.

In fact, people tend to show off their acts of love. This opposite error is also condemned by Jesus.

So, the lesson gets more complex. Acts of love aren’t normally committed in the dark, but neither should they be spotlighted to our credit. The point of the love is the love.

This traces back to the single unifying point that everything traces back to—God’s glory. The purpose of X is God’s glory, no matter what X is. Charity is for God’s glory. Evangelism is for God’s glory. Even Jesus’s death on the cross was for God’s glory.

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, — John 17:1

Our acts of love are not to glorify ourselves; they are to glorify God.

We obey this new-old commandment for His glory, not ours.

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. Why would anyone believe Docetism?
2. Have you been changed by a deep friendship?
3. Have you seen someone believe their own lies?
4. Are you familiar with "I'm OK - You're OK"?
5. Have you ever seen someone hide an act of love?

Items for prayer: