

Living the Truth

A study of the apostle John's first letter

From the earliest records, this writing has been referred to as John's first letter. What is odd about it, is that it does not have the typical characteristics of a Hellenistic letter: the names of the writer and the addressee are missing, it contains no opening greeting and no concluding salutation. It starts and ends abruptly. It is the way the writer addresses his readers that makes it feel letter-like. John refers to them using expressions such as "My dear children" (2:1), "dear friends" (2:7), and "brothers" (3:13). He also identifies closely with his readers, for example, he is concerned about their joy (1:4), about their confusion caused by division (2:19), and about deficiencies in their expressions of love (3:18).

It has a rather baffling style. John does not build up an argument or answer questions systematically, like the apostle Paul does in Romans and 1 Corinthians. Instead, it is like jazz music, in which different instruments take rather irregular turns in leading. First, for example, the trumpet leads, then the piano, then the trombone, then the tuba, then the clarinet... then the piano again, then the drums, then the tuba again... and so on. Instead of instruments, this first letter of John has a number of themes, like love, light, obedience, truth, knowledge and life. Some are mentioned once, some return and are amplified. The difference in style between the Gospel of John and this letter has led some to question if we are looking at two different Johns. But why can't one author have two or more writing styles? The Gospel and this letter do share many typical words and themes. In fact, they are more similar than the Gospel of Luke is to the book of Acts, and most accept that Luke authored both.

What moved the apostle John to write? When he wrote his Gospel, he had much material to choose from. As a disciple who walked along with the Lord Jesus for close to 3 years, he had heard, seen and lived many wonderful things. John clearly had to be selective. "Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book." With what intent did the Spirit of God move him to write the Gospel? John goes on to explain: "*But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name*" (John 20:30-31). The goal of his Gospel is evangelistic. When it comes to this first letter, John wants to help believers to steer clear from lies, sin and error, and enjoy their new Christian life to the full! On five occasions the apostle John informs his readers why he is writing, and these five 'reasons' provide a useful structure to explore the content of his first letter.

1. So that you may experience FELLOWSHIP (1:3)

Fellowship is much more than a general chat with a cup of coffee after a Christian meeting. For the apostle John, fellowship is an important matter, it is something unique and uplifting that can only be lived among true believers. Fellowship is the translation of the Greek word 'koinonia' which means 'to have something in common'. And what do we Christians have in common? Christ! In order to promote Christian fellowship, John starts his letter by sharing

with his readers what he had heard, seen, looked at, touched concerning Christ, the 'Word of life' (1:1-3).

Christian fellowship can be confused with the type of happy comradeship enjoyed between football supporters who belong to the same club. The activities of their club and the success of their team binds them together. True fellowship among Christians is based on personal fellowship "with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ" (1:3). When you are in fellowship with God and when I am also in fellowship with God, we then have something fantastic in common, we are then in a position to experience inter-believer fellowship. Why does the apostle John stress this point? As an old and experienced servant of God, he must have noticed how easily local churches can replace true Christian fellowship with a happy 'football club' behaviour. It is easy for Christian fellowship to be exclusively equated with the activities of 'our' group and the success of 'our' religious endeavours. True Christian fellowship revolves around the Father and the Son. Do you have some Christian friends with whom genuine fellowship can be lived? Is there anything you could do, say or suggest to transform some of those 'coffee chats' and home visits into moments of true fellowship?

2. So that your JOY may be COMPLETE (1:4)

For many the word 'joy' is not one they would rapidly associate with their Christian experience or local church life. For the apostle John, joy was important, and he desired for himself and his readers not only partial joy but "complete joy" (1:4). Some old manuscripts have "our joy" and others "your joy". The 'our' could also include the readers. In this, the apostle was following the Master's desire. After using the illustration of 'the vine and the branches' to encourage His disciples to remain in Him, the Lord Jesus explained: "I have told you this so that *my joy* may be in you and that *your joy may be complete*" (John 15:11). When the Lord prayed for his disciples and those who would follow (that is, for you and me), He said "I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have *the full measure of my joy within them*" (John 17:13). Clearly for the Lord Jesus 'complete joy' in the Christian life was not an extra luxury for the fortunate few but something He desired for every believer.

This 'complete joy' does not laugh in the face of suffering. The Lord Jesus himself also wept (John 11:35). The apostle John knew the pains caused by divisions, separations (2:19) and frustrated expectations (3:18). At times we also may be called to "suffer according to God's will" (1 Pet. 4:19). But the general tone of our Christian life should be one of thankfulness and joy. We need that divine joy in order to press on. As Nehemiah put it "for the joy of the LORD is your strength" (Neh. 8:10). Of course a sense of responsibility is important, but a Christian life driven by an emotionless sense of duty is clearly not what the Lord Jesus has in mind. Faithful but miserable Christians are more likely to judge those who rejoice as they walk with Jesus, and are in danger of making Christianity unattractive to seekers. Is your Christian experience moving in the direction of 'complete joy'? Does something inside you need to change? "We write this to make your joy complete" (1:4).

3. So that you will NOT SIN (2:1)

Today we are prone to avoid the word 'sin' and use terms such as 'mistakes', 'unsocial behaviour' and 'alternative lifestyle'. John mentions sin ten times in this letter. His concern is that believers should take sin seriously, that we should avoid sin, that we should determine to "walk in the light" (1:7), and once we become aware of sin, we should judge and confess it (1:9). Putting the different references together, we find that the apostle makes clear the following four points:

(a) For God sin is a serious matter: The problem of sin was so serious, that the Father had to send His Son “as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10). Our sin and our sins required the death of the Lord Jesus, it is only the blood of Jesus that “purifies us from all sin” (1:7). “But you know that he [the Lord Jesus] appeared so that he might take away our sins” (3:5). The radical and costly solution is clear evidence of sin’s awfulness.

(b) This world is an enemy territory: The social current in which we live is not neutral. We are under strong pressure to accept the Godless values of society. John reminds his readers that “The whole world is under the control of the evil one” (5:19). Therefore the logical command: “Do not love the world or anything in the world...” (2:15-16).

(c) Genuine Christians don’t continue in sin: Can a Christian live comfortably in sin? The apostle replies: “No-one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God’s seed remains in him; he cannot go on sinning, because he has been born of God” (3:9). It is clear that the apostle John does not endorse the doctrine proposed by some that Christians may reach a state of sinless perfection on earth (1:8, 2:1). But he strongly affirms that if a person continues comfortably to live in sin, he or she may be religious, but not ‘born of God’. I suggest that before we try using these apostolic words to judge others whose lifestyle we disapprove of, we should let them x-ray our own hearts.

(d) A clean start is possible: What happens when a Christian fails and sins? “My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense - Jesus Christ, the Righteous One” (2:1). The first important step is to recognize that we have sinned. Then follows sincere repentance and confession of sin. And what a fantastic promise: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1:9). God promises to forgive, not because He is ‘loving and kind’ but because He is ‘faithful and just’ in applying Christ’s redemptive work on our behalf. Do you still feel guilty over a sin you have confessed? Accept God’s words as true. Rest on His promise of forgiveness.

4. So that you may AVOID being DECEIVED (2:26)

The apostle John had noticed that genuine believers can get confused, can believe lies, can be led astray – they can be deceived. Truth has nearly always been important. In Modernity, from the 18th century Enlightenment onwards, we are being told that reason and experimentation are the only tools to discover truth. What is new in Post-Modernity, from the 1960’s onwards, is that truth can now be disconnected from reality: what is true for you may not be true for me. And that, according to post-modern thinking is no problem, because every person may have ‘his own truth’. This flexibility with ‘truth’ has now also affected the way many Christians understand doctrine and theology. For John ‘truth’ is absolute and important. He mentions it many times in this letter and in his Gospel. In fact, of all the times the word ‘truth’ is used in the Bible, about 1/3 of them are found in John’s writings. What you believe in is important. John wanted his readers only to believe in what is true. He didn’t want them to be deceived. Are you also prone to blindly follow ‘old Bible teachers’ because you have always done so, or ‘new trends and interpretations’ because everyone else is doing so? Commitment to God’s truth, at any price, will eliminate two fears: the fear of being branded ‘unfaithful’ by those who follow ‘popular old errors’ and fear of being branded ‘fundamentalist’ by those who follow ‘popular new errors’. If we are afraid of truth, wherever that truth may lead us, we are not genuinely open to listen to God’s voice through His word. Let’s turn now to some of the doctrinal matters which John seeks to clarify in this letter.

(a) The truth about Jesus: Who is Jesus? Is He really God? Was He really human? During the first 4 centuries of the church, such questions kept many Christians busy. Many heresies concerning the true nature of Jesus Christ were invented and followed. In this letter we notice that the apostle is correcting the view that Jesus was not truly human. John says: I heard Him, I saw Him, I touched Him – He was fully human (1:1-3). But He is also the Son of God (4:15), the Christ (5:1), and God Himself (5:20). John opens the Gospel with this same important truth: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was *with God*, and the Word was *God*” (John 1:1). Fellowship is not possible with those who hold an incorrect view of Jesus Christ.

(b) The truth about obedience: Some say that we must obey God’s commands in order to earn our salvation. Others that obedience and lifestyle are unimportant, what matters is only faith. What is the truth? “We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands. The man who says, ‘I know him,’ but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (2:3, 4). Saving faith will always find a way to express itself through obedience.

(c) The truth about love: Is love a warm emotion? Some teach that it is enough to ‘feel loving’ towards God and our fellow humans, that nice words and nice songs suffice. What is the truth? John explains, as he also does in the Gospel, that true love is always connected with some form of action (3:16, John 3:16, 14:21). From God’s point of view, love for God cannot be separated from obedience: “This is love for God: to obey his commands” (5:3). “But if anyone obeys his word, God’s love is truly made complete in him” (2:5). Similarly, our love for fellow humans must be more than nice words and good intentions. It is to be expressed “with actions and in truth” (3:16-18).

(d) The truth about the indwelling Holy Spirit: Do all Christians have the Holy Spirit? The apostle John assures his readers that, “*you have* an anointing from the Holy One” (2:20), and “this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by *the Spirit he gave us*” (3:24). In conclusion, “We know that we live in him and he in us, because *he has given us of his Spirit*” (4:13). The apostle Paul also makes this point clear: “if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ” (Rom. 8:9). You may feel something or you may feel nothing. Our feelings do not alter reality. The truth is that all Christians have the Spirit of God dwelling in them. That is God’s revealed truth. Our calling now is to allow the Spirit of God who dwells in us to also fill us (Eph. 5:18).

(e) The truth about prayer: Prayer is a beautiful topic, simple and yet there is much to learn. In the Gospels we don’t find the disciples asking the Lord Jesus to teach them how to lead a church, how to preach, how to heal the sick or drive out demons. But we do find them asking Him, “Lord, teach us to pray” (Luk. 11:1). Over the years, many formulas have been given on how to get God to do what we want. The truth is the other way round: God is the Boss and we are the servants. The apostle John reminds his readers that effectiveness in prayer is related to their daily walk with Jesus (3:21-22) and seeking and asking in line with God’s will (5:14-15).

5. So that you may KNOW that you have ETERNAL LIFE (5:13)

For the apostle John, knowledge and assurance are important. He uses the word ‘know’ many times in this letter and in his Gospel. After conversion, many of us struggle with doubts: Am I really a child of God? Is it true that I am eternally saved? Can I be certain that I have eternal life? Such doubts are not new. Satan knows very well that doubts over our salvation cut deep and hurt, they take away our joy, they shake our foundation. The apostle John wanted his readers not only to be saved, but to know they were saved, to enjoy the

assurance of being a child of God. Therefore he writes: "God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that *you may know that you have eternal life*" (5:11-13).

Can we be certain now, before we die, that we have eternal life? The apostle John answers with a clear 'yes'. In fact, to help believers understand and rejoice in this certainty is one of the reasons John wrote this letter. Sometimes I feel saved, sometimes I don't. Certainty cannot depend on my feelings. Personal experiences may be good, but they are personal and subjective. Certainty cannot be based on personal experiences alone. Our soul finds rest and doubts give way to certainty as we learn to believe His word. For a few years after my conversion I struggled with serious doubts. I wanted some determining experience to settle the matter once and for all. Such experience never came. Certainty about my salvation only came as I learnt to believe God's promises, to trust God's word. And when doubts return, I return to the promises. If you also struggle, memorize and choose to believe God's powerful promises. Start for example with this one: "I tell you *the truth*, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me *has eternal life and will not be condemned*; he has crossed over from death to life" (John 5:24). Assurance will come as you discover God's promises and believe them. How do you feel when someone does not believe what you say? How do you think God feels when we read His promises and continue to doubt? In this letter the apostle John explains twice that when God states a truth and we don't believe it, "we make him out to be a liar" (1:10, 5:10). And God is no liar! God doesn't need to promise anything. The only reason He promises something is so we may 'know', believe, and enjoy the peace of assurance.

Conclusion

The apostle John wrote his Gospel to help his readers believe and be saved. He wrote this first letter to believers, to help them grow, avoid sin and error, and enjoy their Christian experience. Like the varying instruments in jazz music, the apostle alternates between a number of important themes, bringing home a powerful message with distinct simplicity and clarity. Five times he shares with his readers the burden the Lord has laid on his heart. These five reasons for writing may be remembered using five words: fellowship, joy, sin, truth and certainty. These key words can provide a useful handle for the teaching of this letter. The apostle John was no theorist. Yes, he laid great value on 'knowing' and 'truth', but for practical reasons rather than academic ones. We know that the old loving apostle experienced "great joy" when he came across believers, young or old, who were "walking in the truth" (2 John 4). If you were to meet him, would your way of living also give him reason to rejoice?

Philip Nunn
Eindhoven, NL
September 2012

Source: www.philipnunn.com