

The First letter of John

True Knowledge

Answers to Session Two: The Nature and Work of Christ

Remember that to some extent these are just suggested answers open to debate.

The Nature of Christ: 1 John 1:1-4

1. *"The Word"* is the Gospel message; the good news from God, and that word came in human form. John tells us that Jesus *"was from the beginning"*. William Barclay explains: *"That is to say, in him eternity entered time; in him the eternal God personally entered time"*. So God entered the world in Jesus as a real human being so that people might learn about everlasting life through him.

2. It is reminiscent of the beginning of John's Gospel, *"In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word was God."* So we might also say that the message is Jesus himself, as John says here *"the word of life"*, which is also used by Paul in Philippians 1:14.

Usually we refer to the Gospel message as *"the word of God"* or *"the word of the Lord"*, but other terms are used, but not so much in our modern translations, you have to go back to the RSV or KJV. The modern tendency is to use *"message"* instead of *"word"*, but in the KJV or RSV we get lovely phrases which describe the good news: in 2 Corinthians 5:19 we get, *"the word of truth"*; in Hebrews 5:13, *"the word of righteousness"*; in Acts 13:26, *"the word of salvation"* and in Acts 13:26, *"The word of his grace"*. Those are examples from three authors, other than John who used *"word"*. But I think it is from John that we get the understanding that Christ is, life, truth, righteousness, salvation, grace and so much more.

3. John confirms that Jesus, during his time on earth, was fully human. By speaking of *"the Word of life"* and *"the eternal Life"*, *"That was from the beginning"*, he is confirming Jesus' divinity, *"Which was with the Father"*. Then the witness account of having heard, seen and touched him confirms that he was as physical as all humans are.

In most translations he seems to be repeating himself by writing that they had *"seen"* and *"looked at"* him, but two different words are used in the Greek. The first means, *"seen with our eyes"*, but the second seems best translated by J.B. Phillips as, *"had the opportunity to observe closely"*. This gives the idea of having understood who Jesus was and what he had come to do. The same Greek word is used by Matthew in 11:7 to convey what Jesus meant when he asked the crowds, in reference to John the Baptist, *"What did you go out onto the desert to see?"* They had gone to find out who he was, why he had come and what his message was about.

John's authority for this witness account is that he was one of the twelve disciples and was with Jesus during the three years of his ministry. He had seen the crucifixion and watched Jesus die. He had then been a witness to how the grave cloths had lain and then seen the resurrected Jesus; watched him tend a fire, cook breakfast, walk and talk. John was the perfect witness to both the incarnation and Resurrection. He knows that and he is taking this opportunity to inform as many people as possible and counter the Gnostic heresies.

There is also, of course, the likelihood that John was a first cousin of Jesus' and so had known him all his life through this close family tie.

4. He uses the pronoun “we” to emphasise that he was not the only person to have been closely acquainted with Jesus. Other people had written to testify to the truth as John is doing. There may even have been some people in the Churches of Asia Minor, who had been young during the Incarnation, who were still alive when John wrote and could also testify. Remember this was written after the fall of Jerusalem and Jews had fled to all corners of the Empire, and that included Christian Jews.
Also in John’s mind there would have been importance of at least two adult, male witnesses in order to meet the requirements of the Jewish law he grew up with.
5. The importance of these verses lies in the very fact that they are a first-hand, eye-witness account, handed down for us by God’s grace.

The Work of Christ: 1 John 2:1-6

7. Verses 2:1-2 describe the work of Christ: John is writing to remind us that we must be obedient to God’s laws. But when we do fail and sin, Jesus will plead our cause with God the Father, because he sacrificed himself so that our sins and the sins of the world might be forgiven.
Christ is both our advocate and the propitiation for our sins. This is his ongoing work.

N.B.I think “propitiation” is best understood as a gift that brings peace.

8. How do we know we have the true knowledge of God? The answer is in obedience to his word; obedience to Jesus teaching; the moral laws spelt out for us. As John puts it in 2:3, “*We know that we have come to know him if we obey his commands*”. We obey his commands by walking as Jesus did (2:6).

Do you remember how James called this knowledge ‘*wisdom*’? (James 1:5) and told us that it is obtained through prayer, “*ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him.*” In the rest of his letter James goes on to tell us that we have to play our part; that our faith is empty without action and that action is the “*obedience*” of which John speaks.

Have you noticed how often John used the words, “*knowledge*” or “*you know*” during the letter? This repetition is to hammer home his definition of the “*true knowledge*” linked to the understanding and fellowship that the Christian should have with God. He wants his readers to recognise that he is speaking out to deny the heretical mystery knowledge that the Gnostics are on about and which is so confusing people.

9. The antichrist is Satan and the antichrists are those who are doing Satan’s work, in this case the false teachers (1 John 2:18). John links their appearance to the last hour, because of the warnings Jesus gave to the disciples and which we can read in Matthew chapter 24 and in which the appearance of false teachers is a sign of the end of the age or as John puts it, “*the last hour*”. We know that God’s time is not the same as our time; nevertheless, the sense of urgency John imparts must always apply, when danger threatens.