

Study Series: 1, 2, and 3 John

The Big Picture: Some important things to keep in mind when reading 1, 2, and 3 John

Life and Fellowship

The word translated “life” (ζωή or *zōé*) is a key theological concept in John’s writings. The noun form of the word appears 40 times in the Gospel of John and 1 John. In the Fourth Gospel, it is identified with the pre-existent Christ (John 6.35, 48; 8.12; 11.25; 14.6). The author indicates that his reason for writing the Gospel is so that readers might believe and have life (John 20.31; cf. 1 John 5.13). Once obtained, life (in Christ) requires faithful action on the part of believers (John 12.25,26; cf. 8.51,52; 13.31-35).

In 1 John, the gift of life also has a Christological foundation. The Son of God is revealed as life (1 John 1.1,2), and he has been sent into the world in order that we might have life through him (1 John 4.9; cf. John 12.50; 14.19). The promise of life is grounded upon our being in the Son (1 John 2.23-25), and it is only within the context of community with Christ and fellow believers that God’s gift of life can be received and experienced (1 John 5.11-17). God’s gift of life in John’s view has an ethical dimension, which takes shape in the context of godly and Christ-like love between fellow believers that all Christians are called to espouse (1 John 3.14-18; 4.19-21).

Recalling the self-conscious emphasis on writing found throughout 1 John (e.g., 1.4; 2.1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 26; 5.13), biblical exegete Georg Strecker writes, “the author leaves no doubt that he sees as his proper task, and one that he is attempting to fulfill in this writing, to mediate [life] by means of the word” (18,19, author’s emphasis). In other words, a true understanding of the Christ-event is conveyed to the readers through the witness of this text such that they are able to then experience the life brought about by that event (see e.g., 1 John 1.1-4; 5.10).

The phrase, “so that you may share in this life with us” (1 John 1.3, CEV) can also be read, “so that you may have fellowship with us” (RSV). In addition to this verse, the concept of “fellowship” (*koinônia*) appears in 1 John 1.6,7 and 2 John 11. Elsewhere in the New Testament, it occurs most frequently in Pauline and post-Pauline writings, though it also appears in 1 Peter and Hebrews. There are two dimensions of the believer’s fellowship. On one hand, we have fellowship with Christ (1 Corinthians 1.9). That is, we participate in Christ’s sufferings (Philippians 3.10; 1 Peter 4.13), in Christ’s body and blood (1 Corinthians 10.16), and in the Spirit (2 Corinthians 13.13; Philippians 2.1). On the other hand, we have fellowship with one another (Acts 2.42; Hebrews 13.16; Romans 12.13; 15.27), both as human beings in creation and especially as brothers and sisters in Christ. The collection for the Christian community in Jerusalem, which Paul went to great lengths to collect, is a salient example of charitable fellowship and is labeled *koinônos* accordingly (2 Corinthians 8.4; 9.13; Romans 15.26). This same two-fold aspect of fellowship appears in 1 John as well.

Strecker writes, “‘Fellowship’ with Father and Son is fundamental to the being and self-understanding of the Christian community (1.3b, 6). The fellowship of Christians with one another is a consequence of this, and the author leaves no doubt of his conviction that the fellowship of believers founded by Christ must result in the undivided unity of the Christian community” (20). The Christ-event—that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, appeared in the flesh (1.1-4; 4.2,3)—is the foundation upon which Christian fellowship is established.

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Discussion questions about the overall message

1. What is life? Where is life found and how does one find it? What are the implications of your answer?
According to your answer, how is life made manifest; how do we experience it?
2. Compare and contrast the references to fellowship scattered throughout 1, 2, and 3 John with those found in Paul's letter.
What are the similarities and differences?
3. What do you think fellowship is really about? In other words, what is the nature and practice of true Christian fellowship?
On what is Christian unity to be based?
4. What is (Christian) love? Read the Johannine Epistles very carefully and reflect on this question from within the entire context of all that is going on in these letters (e.g., divisions over "truth" and right beliefs, the establishment of group boundaries, whether and to whom one should lend support and extend hospitality, etc.).

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Discussion questions about 1 John

1. According to 1 John, what does it mean to “live in the light” and to “live in the dark” (1.5-10; 2.9-11, CEV)?
2. 1 John reveals a number of conflicts that were happening in the early church. What seems to have caused some of these conflicts (see e.g., 1.8-10; 2.18-26; 4.1-3)? What conflicts do you see happening in the church today? How can these conflicts be resolved?
3. Why is it important for Christians to show love for one another (3.7-18; 4.7-18)?
4. Who are God’s children (5.1)? Who has eternal life (5.11,12)?
5. Choose one verse from 1 John that you think is particularly helpful or meaningful. Why is this verse meaningful to you?

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Discussion questions about 2 John

1. What does 2 John say about love? What does it say about truth?
2. What particular lie was being spread among the Christian churches?
How were God's people supposed to act toward those who were spreading this lie (7-10)?
3. How do Christians today show love for God and for others?

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Discussion questions about 3 John

1. What seems to be the “truth” mentioned by the author of this letter (1-8, 12)? Who is attacking the truth in Gaius’ church?
2. Based on this brief letter, how would you describe Gaius’ church (congregation)?
3. What kinds of problems was Diotrephes causing in Gaius’ church (9,10)? What problems have you observed happening when someone wants to be considered “the number one leader” in a church group?
4. Why is it important to encourage and welcome those who follow the Lord, especially those who teach and preach the truth?