

SESSION ONE

The Word of Life

1 John 1:1-4

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover that John writes as an eyewitness of the incarnate Word, and that his testimony exists for one purpose: to draw us into *koinonia*, a real shared life with the apostles and, through them, with the Father and the Son.

Catholic Touchstone: Apostolic Tradition. The faith reaches us the same way it reached John's first readers: through the living testimony of the apostolic Church, handed on in her teaching, life, and worship (CCC 75-79, 425).

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The letter never names its author. From the earliest witnesses (St. Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian), the Church has received it as the work of St. John the Apostle, the beloved disciple, writing from Ephesus late in the first century, likely between AD 85 and 100. Some ancient and modern scholars have proposed a distinct figure, "John the Elder," as author of one or more of these letters. The Church has not formally defined the question, and the letter's inspiration and authority do not depend on it. What is certain is that the vocabulary, style, and theology are unmistakably those of the Fourth Gospel: light and darkness, truth and lie, abiding, love, life.

The occasion is a wound. A group has left the community (2:19), apparently denying that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh (2:22; 4:2-3). These were likely early docetic or proto-gnostic teachers who could accept a divine Christ but not a Christ you could touch. John writes not primarily to refute them but to reassure the faithful who stayed: you are the ones who have the truth, the anointing, and eternal life.

Formally, 1 John barely qualifies as a letter. There is no greeting, no named sender or recipient, no farewell. It reads like a homily or pastoral tract, and it moves in spirals rather than straight lines: light, love, and life keep returning at deeper levels. Do not fight this structure; teach with it.

The prologue (1:1-4) deliberately echoes both Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1. Notice the pile of sense verbs: *heard, seen with our eyes, looked upon, touched with our hands*. The Greek verb behind "touched," *psēlaphaō*, is the same verb family the risen Jesus uses in Luke 24:39. John is claiming full-bodied, physical, courtroom-grade testimony.

Koinonia, translated "fellowship" in 1:3, means far more than friendliness. It is shared participation, common life, joint ownership of a reality. John's grammar is precise: the apostles proclaim so that you may have *koinonia* with us, and our *koinonia* is with the Father and with his Son. Communion with God arrives through communion with the apostolic community. That single verse carries the Catholic doctrine of Tradition in seed form.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Genesis 1:1. "That which was from the beginning" reaches behind Bethlehem to the first words of Scripture. The Word John heard at supper is the Word by whom the heavens were made (Psalm 33:6). The letter opens where the Bible opens.

Deuteronomy 4:12. At Horeb, Israel "heard the sound of words, but saw no form." The Old Covenant lived under that sentence: the true God speaks, and even its theophanies remain veiled and mediated; his form is not seen (cf. Exodus 33:20). John announces the great reversal. The Life "was made manifest, and we saw it" (1:2). What Sinai withheld, the Incarnation gave: the invisible God with a face, a voice, and hands that could be held.

Proverbs 8:22-31. Wisdom, present with God "at the beginning of his work," delighting in the sons of men, foreshadows the Word who was with the Father and has now come to dwell among the very children of men Wisdom delighted in.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. Augustine *Ten Homilies on the First Epistle of John, Homily 1*

Augustine marvels that the Life which only the heart could see was manifested in the flesh so that eyes could see it too, and in seeing, the heart itself might be healed. The apostles handled the Word of life with their hands, he preaches, and it is through their testimony, handed on in the Church, that the same touch now reaches us.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Ignatius of Antioch *Letter to the Smyrnaeans 1-3*

Writing within a few years of this letter, on his way to martyrdom, Ignatius insists that Jesus was truly born, truly crucified, and truly raised, and that even after the Resurrection the disciples touched him and knew he was no bodiless phantom. The earliest Church staked its blood on exactly the reality John's prologue describes.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Bede the Venerable *Commentary on the Seven Catholic Epistles, on 1 John 1*

Bede reads the opening as John's deliberate return to the beginning of his own Gospel: the eternal Word truly assumed flesh, and the apostles' seeing, hearing, and touching is the foundation on

which the Church's proclamation rests. Our fellowship, he teaches, is built not on speculation but on testimony.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 425 quotes 1 John 1:1-4 directly: the transmission of the Christian faith consists primarily in proclaiming Jesus Christ in order to lead others to faith in him, and the aim of that proclamation is communion, exactly John's chain from testimony to *koinonia*.

CCC 75-79 describes how the apostolic preaching is handed on in a living Tradition, so that the Church, in her teaching, life, and worship, perpetuates and hands on to every generation all that she herself is and believes.

CCC 949-953 unpacks the communion of the faithful: communion in the faith, in the sacraments, in charisms, and in charity, the full flowering of the *koinonia* John announces in verse 3.

THREAD WATCH

The Knowing thread (plant now, resolve Session Ten). John uses "we know" and "you know" more than thirty times in five short chapters. Name the pattern tonight and tell the group you will be tracking it, but do not reveal where it lands. The payoff is 1 John 5:13, where John states in one sentence why he wrote the letter. Guard that verse until Session Ten.

The God Is thread (sealed guess, Take-Home 1). John gives two different completions of the sentence "God is ____" in this letter (the second is so important he states it twice). Take-Home 1 asks each participant to write two sealed guesses. The first blank resolves at Session Two, the second at Session Eight. Distribute Take-Home 1 tonight and make the sealing ceremonial; the fun depends on it.

The Abiding and Antichrist thread begins at Session Four and develops through Sessions Seven and Eleven. Nothing to plant tonight except the word *abide*, which is worth underlining every time it appears.

SESSION GOALS

1.

Establish the group covenant: confidentiality, honest questions welcome, Scripture open every week, and the rhythm of each session: connection, discovery, commission.

2.

Discover from the text itself the eyewitness character of the letter and the strangeness of its opening.

3.

Define *koinonia* from verse 3 and trace its chain: apostolic testimony, fellowship with the apostles, fellowship with the Father and the Son.

4.

Plant the Knowing thread and distribute Take-Home 1 with the sealed guess.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, cut Build question 8 and shorten the Dig Deeper box to a one-sentence mention. Do not cut the sealed guess instructions at the end; the thread architecture depends on them.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Father, in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with you, and the Word was God. You did not leave us to guess at you from a distance. You let yourself be heard, seen, and held. As we open this letter written by one who touched your Son, give us the fellowship he promised: with his witnesses, with one another, and with you. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Describe a time when hearing about something secondhand turned out to be nothing like experiencing it yourself. What was the difference?

2.

When you hear the word "fellowship," what honestly comes to mind: a church potluck, a deep friendship, a hobbit quest, something else? What do you think it *should* mean?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Have someone read 1 John 1:1-4 aloud slowly. Then have a second person read it again. As the opening of a letter, what is strange about it? What is missing that we would expect?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

There is no author's name, no addressee, no greeting, no "grace and peace." Compare any of St. Paul's openings and the absence is glaring. 1 John opens like a proclamation, not correspondence.

And its first words reach deliberately backward: "that which was from the beginning" echoes both

Genesis 1:1 and John 1:1. John does not begin with himself. He begins where the Bible begins, with the Word.

2.

Go through verses 1-3 and list every verb of the senses. What is John piling up, and why might he be piling it?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Heard. Seen with our eyes. Looked upon. Touched with our hands. Then seen and heard are repeated in verse 3. Four kinds of sensory contact, stacked like sworn testimony.

John is insisting that the Word of life entered the world of bodies. This letter will confront teachers who apparently denied exactly that, a Christ too spiritual to bleed (see 2:19; 4:2-3). Every sense verb is a nail in the coffin of that idea. The group does not need the opponents explained yet; let the emphasis itself raise the question of why John protests so much.

3.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Someone find and read Luke 24:39. What does the risen Jesus invite the disciples to do, and what is John claiming to have done?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Handle me, and see; for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have." The verb John uses for "touched" in 1:1 (*psēlaphaō*) belongs to the same word family. On the Church's traditional identification, John writes as a man who accepted that invitation: on Easter night, and at the supper table before it (John 13:25).

The apostle who leaned on the Lord's breast is the one now writing "touched with our hands." Testimony does not get closer than that.

4.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Two volunteers: read Genesis 1:1 and Deuteronomy 4:12. At Horeb, what did Israel receive from God, and what were they denied? What has changed by 1 John 1:1-2?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Israel "heard the sound of words, but saw no form." Throughout the Old Covenant, God speaks, but his form is not seen; even the theophanies remain veiled (Exodus 33:20). That is the ache underneath the entire Old Testament.

John announces the reversal: "the life was made manifest, and we saw it." The eternal life "which was with the Father" has become visible and touchable. The God of Sinai now has a face. This is why the Incarnation, not merely the teaching of Jesus, is the center of Christianity.

5.

Verse 3 tells us why John is writing at all. Trace the chain carefully: who proclaims, to whom, so that what, and what is that fellowship ultimately with?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The apostolic "we" proclaims to "you" so that "you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." Notice the order John chooses: fellowship with the apostles is the doorway to fellowship with God.

The word is *koinonia*: shared participation, common life. John's readers never touched Jesus. Neither have we. The touch reaches us through the apostles' living testimony, handed on in the Church's teaching, life, and worship: the living transmission the Church calls Tradition (CCC 78). Verse 3 is Catholic ecclesiology in one sentence.

6.

A thoughtful friend says: "I don't need a Church to connect me to God. I go straight to Jesus." First, take that seriously: what is genuinely attractive, and genuinely true, in it? Then look again at verse 3. What does John's own grammar say about how fellowship with the Father actually arrives?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Give the position its full strength first. It is true that God desires personal intimacy with every soul, true that no institution can substitute for personal faith, and true that religious middlemen have sometimes obscured Jesus rather than revealed him. A Catholic should concede all of that happily.

But press the text. John's readers could not go straight to the Jesus of history; he had ascended. Their access ran through the ones who heard, saw, and touched him: "fellowship with us," and thereby with the Father. The apostolic community is not a barrier between the believer and Christ; it is the appointed bridge, the living testimony that carries the touch forward (CCC 425; 75-79). Going "straight to Jesus" and going through his apostolic Church are not rivals. The second is how the first was designed to happen.

DIG DEEPER · Four Gospels, four beginnings

Mark begins with the Baptist in the desert. Matthew begins with Abraham. Luke traces back to Adam. John alone begins before creation: "In the beginning was the Word." 1 John 1:1 assumes that summit and asks the pastoral question: now that the Word has been touched, what kind of life together does that create? The Gospel gives the fact; the letter gives the fellowship.

7.

Verse 4: John says he writes "so that our joy may be complete." Why would an eyewitness's joy be incomplete until he shares it? What does joy have to do with testimony?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Joy in Scripture is communal and expansive by nature; it demands to be shared, like good news that

physically cannot stay in your mouth. A witness who cannot testify is a man holding his breath.

John, likely the last living apostle, has carried this testimony for six decades. Completing the circle of *koinonia*, drawing his little children into the fellowship he shares with the Father, is the completion of his own joy. Evangelization is not a duty bolted onto the Christian life; it is what joy does.

8.

John never argues for the Incarnation in these verses. He testifies to it. What is the difference between an argument and testimony, and which do you think our generation finds more credible?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

An argument stakes an idea; testimony stakes the witness himself, his senses, his memory, his honesty, and eventually his life. The Greek word for witness is *martys*, and it became our word martyr because so many witnesses sealed their testimony in blood.

Let the group wrestle honestly with the second half. Many will say our generation distrusts arguments but is disarmed by authentic witness. That intuition is ancient: the Church has always advanced on testimony first and argument second. It is also this study's method. We are reading a witness statement.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

Whose testimony carried the faith to you? Name the actual human links in your chain back to the apostles.

2.

This week, what would it look like to treat Sunday Mass as the place where the hearing and touching of the Word still happens, where testimony becomes *koinonia*?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Once this week, read John 1:1-18 side by side with 1 John 1:1-4 and mark every echo you find between them.

2.

Write down the name of one person whose testimony carried the faith to you. Thank God for them by name every day this week, and if it is possible, thank them directly.

3.

At Mass this Sunday, at the elevation of the Host, silently pray verse 1: "which we have looked upon and touched with our hands."

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Word of life, you let yourself be heard, seen, and held so that our fellowship might be with the Father and with you. Complete your joy in us. Make this little group a true koinonia, and make our lives testimony. St. John, beloved disciple, pray for us. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: *"That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us; and our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ." (1 John 1:3, RSV2CE)*

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session One, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read aloud twice at Build 1

Luke 24:39

Live discovery, Build 3: "Handle me, and see"

Genesis 1:1

Live discovery, Build 4: "from the beginning"

Deuteronomy 4:12

Live discovery, Build 4: heard words, saw no form

Psalms 33:6

Leader background: the Word by whom the heavens were made

Proverbs 8:22-31

Leader background: Wisdom with God at the beginning

John 1:1-18

Live It This Week, practice 1

CCC 425; 75-79; 949-953

Catechism Connection