

AND CAN IT BE? – Part 1 **(1 John 1:1-4 October 4, 1998)**

Last weekend, I spoke to a wonderful group of young men and women at the Chinese Christian Church of Brisbane's Youth Camp. Perhaps the question I was asked the most there was this – how do I **know** if I am a Christian? That is a great question.

And indeed that is a question most of us have asked ourselves at one time or another.

The issue of salvation is the most basic one we can ever approach, but it is also one of the most vital.

Many Christians fall into one of two traps – Forever questioning the validity of their own salvation or never questioning whether they are truly Christ's.

In this church I suspect that most err on the side of questioning their salvation. In one sense it is healthy to check ourselves against the standard of Scripture from time to time. But to rack our hearts over this issue robs the child of God of the comfort and assurance that is their right at adoption.

Salvation is a vital piece of knowledge. *First*, because it helps us to rest secure in our eternal destiny. And *second* because we need to know who is on the side of Christ. Who is in the fight with us? Who can we rely on and minister shoulder to shoulder with. We don't want wolves in the flock, but we don't want to turn away a brother in the Lord.

Determining salvation is difficult. Christians don't come with a little visible mark on their forehead that identifies them as belonging to Christ. We cannot know for certain who is Christ's and who is not. **But**, we can have a fair idea.

Basically, if something looks like a duck, quacks like a duck and walks like a duck – chances are it is a duck.

The Lord knew that the necessity of us being able to tell the apostates from the misguided or weak sheep. And He wanted His own to be able to rejoice in the knowledge of their salvation not live with perpetual doubts. So He provided Scriptural tests that mark out the true brother.

1 John is an entire book of these Scriptural tests. 1 John 5:13 says this:

These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may **know** that you have eternal life.

These are not tests to rob us of joy but to enhance the joy of knowing we are Christ's. 1 John 1:4:

These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

So, how do we know if we are saved? We know if we meet two criteria.

The first criteria is **the faith**. We have accepted and believe the **true** gospel, the true facts about God and salvation – the faith which was once for all handed down to the saints.

Trusting the true gospel is a non-negotiable. Listen to how important this is to John:

1 John 2:21-24:

I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son. Whoever denies the Son does not have the Father; the one who confesses the Son has the Father also. As for you, let that abide in you which you heard from the beginning. If what you heard from the beginning abides in you, you also will abide in the Son and in the Father.

1 John 4:2-3:

By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God; and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God; and this is the *spirit* of the antichrist, of which you have heard that it is coming, and now it is already in the world.

1 John 4:15:

Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God.

1 John 5:1:

WHOWER believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God; and whoever loves the Father loves the *child* born of Him.

1 John 5:10-12:

The one who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; the one who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed in the witness that God has borne concerning His Son. And the witness is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.

The true Christian holds to the true faith. He knows God and His Son and that salvation is all of God through the work of the Son.

But there is a second criteria that marks out the child of God – **the fruit**. We will bear the **true** fruits of salvation.

God does not leave those He calls to wallow in sin. He begins the work of conforming them to the image of His Son. While we are instantly freed from the penalty of sin, we spend our lives growing able to resist the bondage of sin. We never reach perfection,

but we learn to overcome our lusts and the evil one. We learn to love our neighbour. We learn to be like Christ.

1 John is a book literally filled entirely with these two tests – doctrinal orthodoxy and practical consequences of that faith.

John understood the truth James proclaimed – faith without works is dead. The true faith **will** lead to godly works. The true child of God will have such fruits as godliness, confession of sin, obedience, love of the brethren and prayer.

John makes this point over and over. Listen to these verses.

1 John 2:3-6:

And by this we know that we have come to know Him, if we keep His commandments. The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; but whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him: the one who says he abides in Him ought himself to walk in the same manner as He walked.

1 John 3:6-10:

No one who abides in Him sins; no one who sins has seen Him or knows Him. Little children, let no one deceive you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, that He might destroy the works of the devil. No one who is born of God practices sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. By this the children of God and the children of the devil are obvious: anyone who does not practice righteousness is not of God, nor the one who does not love his brother.

1 John 4:7-8:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.

1 John 4:20-21:

If someone says, “I love God,” and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.

1 John 5:18:

We know that no one who is born of God sins; but He who was born of God keeps him and the evil one does not touch him.

These are just a few examples to show you that throughout this whole book, true faith **and** true fruit are held up as the manifestations that mark out a true child of God. If these things are yours – then you can **know** that you are Christ's. You can rest secure in Him.

But, note that John doesn't just give a list of vital doctrines and then a list of good works. No! These two tests are intertwined throughout this whole book, for the truth is that it is impossible to dissect them from each other.

Believing the true doctrine **will** lead to salvation and the Holy Spirit **will** then produce fruit in every child of God. Trusting the true God necessarily leads to salvation which necessarily leads to Him producing fruit in us.

John 15:5:

I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me, and I in him, he bears much fruit.

The one who is in Christ **will** always bear fruit, because Christ works in us to produce all the products of salvation.

These fruits point to true salvation. In Matthew 7:17-20, Christ said:

So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a good tree produce bad fruit. ... So then, you will know them by their fruits.

OK time to catch our breath. Let me sum up what I have just said. How can we be sure of our salvation? How can we know the false teachers who would lead us astray? The answer in both cases is that the true child of God will have **both true faith and true fruit**. Faith and Fruit – Not just one or the other – **both!**

However, don't fall into the trap of making these two tests of true faith and true fruits into legalism that rob you of the joy of salvation. You don't have to be a theologian of the highest order fluent in Greek and Hebrew to grasp the gospel. We are talking about the spiritual truths of the faith that the Holy Spirit places in the hearts of believers. Children enter the kingdom. Intellectually handicapped enter the kingdom. We are talking about accepting the basic truths of who God is and what He is doing. We are not talking about grasping the nuances of infralapsarianism.

And also, don't think that true fruit equals perfection. Don't think that your sin and failures mark you as an unbeliever. That is why John wrote what has often been the most wonderful words in all Scripture to me. 1 John 1:8-9:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

We are sinners and the blood of Christ is available for sinners such as us.

As we will see in this book, true believers sin and struggle. In fact the very struggle with sin is evidence of their salvation.

Edward Griffin gave this advice concerning salvation:

Show me a man in whom holiness and sin are struggling for dominion, and I will show you one who is already born again.¹

This book is meant to be a comfort to true believers NOT to cause them to lie awake at night questioning their salvation. If you grasp the basics of who God is and that salvation is all of God. And if the Spirit of God leads you to desire God and His ways – then you are His child.

This is not something new to John. It is found throughout both the Old and New Testaments.

Salvation in the Old Testament was only found through faith alone placed in the true God. Genesis 15:6:

And [Abraham] believed in the LORD; and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

And the result of salvation was always fruit. Psalm 15:

○ LORD, who may abide in Thy tent?
Who may dwell on Thy holy hill?
He who walks with integrity, and works righteousness,
And speaks truth in his heart.
He does not slander with his tongue,
Nor does evil to his neighbour,
Nor takes up a reproach against his friend;
In whose eyes a reprobate is despised,
But who honours those who fear the LORD;
He swears to his own hurt, and does not change;
He does not put out his money at interest,
Nor does he take a bribe against the innocent.
He who does these things will never be shaken.

Faith and Fruit.

The same thing is found throughout the New Testament. But, Paul warned that there was a gospel that perverted these fundamental truths and it led straight to hell. Galatians 1:6-9:

I am amazed that you are so quickly deserting Him who called you by the grace of Christ, for a different gospel; which is *really* not another; only there are some who are disturbing you, and want to distort the gospel of Christ. But even though

¹ Edward Griffin, *A Series of Lectures Delivered in Park Street Church Boston* (Boston, 1813) p. 124.

we, or an angel from heaven, should preach to you a gospel contrary to that which we have preached to you, let him be accursed. As we have said before, so I say again now, if any man is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you received, let him be accursed.

And this gospel of demons came in many varieties, but all had the same foundation. A denial of a central tenet of the faith or a denial of the reality of true fruit.

Alright. That leads us to ask – well what truths do the Scriptures declare as foundational truths? What truths are the watershed between salvation and apostasy?

The early church was confronted with the necessity of determining the basics of the faith right from the time of the Apostles. So they called the great councils of the first four hundred years. Here they began to elucidate the foundational truths and enshrined them in the great creeds of the faith. These truths are clearly evident in Scripture, but the sin of man blinded eyes to these truths, thus the need for these great councils.

The foundational truths they declared were these.

#1 – The Sovereignty of God. Romans 8 and 9 might be the clearest expositions of this doctrine in Scripture, but every page of the Word is in fact full of this truth. God is Almighty. His will and His alone is determinative in the universe. He created and sustains all there is. There is no other God.

#2 – The full deity AND humanity of Jesus Christ. Christ is God – co-equal and co-eternal with God the Father. But He took on human flesh to die as a propitiation for our sins. Much of 1 John is spent upholding this very doctrine. Inextricably linked to this doctrine are truths such as the virgin birth, the substitutionary atonement of Christ and His resurrection.

#3 – The deity of the Holy Spirit – while not receiving the same emphasis as the deity of Christ, this truth is a foundation throughout the Word. Basically we could sum this up as the doctrine of the Trinity.

These truths were enshrined in the great creeds of the early church. Here is one example.

THE NICENE CREED

I believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible:

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten of His Father before all worlds, God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father, by whom all things were made;

Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven,
and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the Virgin Mary,

and was made man, and crucified for us under Pontius Pilate;
He suffered and was buried, and the third day He rose again
according to the Scriptures and ascended into heaven,
and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;
And He shall come again, with glory to judge both the living and the dead;
Whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified; who spoke by the prophets. And I believe in one catholic and apostolic church; I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; and I look for the resurrection of the dead; and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Note that catholic here has nothing to do with the Roman Catholic church – it refers to one universal church – the body of Christ.

These creeds were tests of orthodoxy. These were foundations upon which the church was built. But, while they laid out a number of foundational truths regarding the Godhead, unfortunately the creeds did not do the same in the other basic area of the faith – salvation.

This allowed the Roman Catholic church to remain fairly biblical in terms of the Godhead, but to utterly pervert the Scriptural teaching on salvation.

Thus the need for the Reformation. It was here that the other Scriptural truths basic to the faith found clear expression. Again these truths are very clear in the pages of the Bible but are twisted by those who deny their reality.

#4 – Sola Gratia. Salvation by grace alone. Ephesians 2:8-10:

For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, *it is* the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast. For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.

Salvation is a free gift of God. We can add nothing to our salvation. Nothing in us contributes to our salvation. Nothing we can do can merit the favour of God. Related to this subject is the doctrine of the depravity of man. Man is sinful and incapable of meriting salvation. Even after our adoption as sons of God, the chains of sin are ours. That is why John says this in 1 John 1:8:

If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

#5 – Sola Fide. Salvation through faith alone. Romans 10:9-10 cannot be clearer:

If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you shall be saved; for with the heart man believes, resulting in righteousness, and with the mouth he confesses, resulting in salvation.

Yet Paul was constantly fighting to proclaim this truth. The book of Galatians attacks the Judaizers for the heresy of adding to faith alone. They wanted to add the law of Moses to salvation by faith. Paul calls this another gospel. Salvation is always by faith alone.

#6 – Sola Scriptura. Our faith is based upon the Scriptures alone. 2 Timothy 3:16-17:

All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Church history, tradition, Popes – all are irrelevant to determining the foundations of the faith. The only God-given source of revelation is the inspired Word of God.

#7 – Soli Deo Gloria. To God alone be the glory. All we do in this world and eternally is designed to give glory to God, for He alone is worthy of glory.

All of these seven great truths are enshrined in the great catechisms and confessions of the faith – the Westminster Confession, the Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689, the Heidelberg Confession and many others.

That is why we have a detailed doctrinal statement in this church. That is why the first section of it includes these non-negotiable truths.

Fail at any of these seven foundational doctrines and you have denied the faith. Your faith is not the faith entrusted once for all to the saints.

Look at the cults. They ALL fail at one or more of these points.

The Word Faith Movement, liberals and most cults deny that God is Sovereign in the sense of the all-powerful supreme deity. To them the Lord is one of many gods or just an impartial universal force.

But the second point – the deity of Christ is one of the big three points at which more cults fail than most. Almost all cults have a perverted Christology or doctrine of Christ. The Word Faith Movement, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, Moonies, liberals – the list of those who stumble here is very long indeed.

They deny one or more of the equality of Christ with God, the humanity of Jesus, His virgin birth, substitutionary atonement or resurrection.

And those who stumble over the deity of Christ invariably stumble over the deity of the Holy Spirit and deny the Trinity.

Salvation by grace alone is the second of the big three. Again most cults deny that salvation is a free gift unmerited by anyone. They prey on our own sense of self-importance and tell us that we can earn salvation – through such means as keeping the pillars of Mormonism or through good works.

And these same cults usually deny the depravity of man. They would claim that there is good somewhere in us. Something we can fan enough to merit salvation.

Salvation through faith alone is the third of the big three. It is inextricably tied to salvation by grace alone. If we earn salvation, then the means is more than just faith alone.

The Catholics, Mormons, Jehovah's Witnesses, liberals – again the list is huge of those who fail to affirm *Sola Fide*. They add something to faith – works, sacraments, baptism, speaking in tongues – the list is huge. The common denominator is a denial that faith *alone* can save.

Sola Scriptura – Faith being based upon the Scriptures alone. Another major point of attack. The source of divine wisdom becomes the Scriptures plus – *Plus* Papal pronouncements, church edicts, the Book of Mormon, the Watchtower, the prophecies of Ellen White and so on.

And the result is that God alone does not get the glory. Man gets glory for earning his own salvation. Glory is given to Mary, the Pope, the saints, Joseph Smith, Reverend Moon and other sinful mortals.

Now, please don't get me wrong. I am not saying that every Christian has to have a perfect grasp of each of these foundational points. No! What I am saying is that the genuine gospel is built upon these truths. The genuine gospel affirms these truths and will not budge one millimetre from them. These are the line in the sand across which we draw the battlelines of fellowship. To stray from this foundation is to preach another gospel. To shipwreck the faith.

God is supreme. God became man in the person of Christ to die for our sins. God does it all. God gets all the glory.

So this is the first half of the test of salvation. Personally, ask yourself if you hold to these struts of the faith. Deny them and this is not the same gospel we are preaching.

I would hope that these truths are dear to each and every one of us.

But that is only the first half of the test. Having the right doctrine in your head by itself will not save. It is believing it in your heart. Trusting your life to the gospel for it is then that you **will** be saved and God will begin a good work in you. He will begin to refine you and make you more like Christ.

We call these changes fruits. And it is these fruits that give us assurance of our salvation. These are what we see in our lives.

Look over at 2 Peter 1:4-11. This is perhaps the clearest set of verses on the assurance of salvation:

For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, in order that by them you might become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust. Now for this very reason also,

applying all diligence, in your faith supply moral excellence, and in *your* moral excellence, knowledge; and in *your* knowledge, self-control, and in *your* self-control, perseverance, and in *your* perseverance, godliness; and in *your* godliness, brotherly kindness, and in *your* brotherly kindness, love. For if these *qualities* are yours and are increasing, they render you neither useless nor unfruitful in the true knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. For he who lacks these *qualities* is blind *or* short-sighted, having forgotten *his* purification from his former sins. Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about His calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things, you will never stumble; for in this way the entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will be abundantly supplied to you.

When we see these fruits of the Spirit in us **and** verse 8 – they are increasing – **then** verse 10 – we can make certain His calling and choosing us.

These gifts of God in our lives are the tangible evidence of Him doing a good work in us.

While we practice these things we know we are His. 1 John 2:4-5:

The one who says, “I have come to know Him,” and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; **but** whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected. By this we know that we are in Him.

A true Christian will bear fruit. Charles Spurgeon gave these marks of a true conversion:

When the Word of God converts a man, *it takes away from him his despair but it does not take from him his repentance.*

True conversion *gives a man pardon, but does not make him presumptuous.*

True conversion *gives a man perfect rest, but it does not stop his progress.*

True conversion *gives a man security, but it does not allow him to leave off being watchful.*

True conversion *gives a man strength and holiness, but it never lets him boast.*

True conversion *gives a harmony to all the duties of Christian life; ... it balances all duties, emotions, hopes and enjoyments.*

True conversion *brings a man to live for God.* He does everything for the glory of God, – whether he eats, or drinks, or whatsoever he does.

True conversion *makes a man live before God ...* He desires to live as in God’s sight at all times, and he is glad to be there ... And such a man now comes to

*live with God. He has blessed communion with Him, he talks with Him as a man talks with his friend.*²

When we see God working in us to rouse us from our self centred state and direct us toward a God-centred state – then that must be the Holy Spirit in us. Nothing in us would desire God.

But understand, we won't all be Apostle Paul's. There is different measures of fruit in the saints. But the true saint will have a hatred of sin and a desire for God. He will fail, but he will hate it and pray for strength to grow more like Christ.

Having said all this – beware. Don't use these principles as a legalistic measuring stick. The new believer in Christ will barely grasp the foundational truths. Their relationship with God and understanding of who He is and what He has done grows with time.

And don't set levels of fruit that equate with salvation. We all have troughs and hard times in our Christian walk. We all bear the sin within. But the overall progress of the child of God is toward Christlikeness.

These are principles not absolutes. Apply them in the wisdom of the Spirit not the legalism of the razor. They are meant to bring comfort and joy not heartache.

So what does all this have to do with 1 John? John understood very well that the Gnostic thought which was perverting the gospel led straight to hell. It wasn't a minor issue. The very question of salvation hung upon it. He **had** to address this cancer in the strongest terms possible. He had to reinforce the true faith and the true fruits of salvation.

So with this in mind, let's begin this marvellous epistle. Today we will only introduce the first section. We will examine it more next week. But for now, turn to 1 John 1:1-4:

WHAT was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life—and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us—what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.

John just begins his epistle. No greetings or other pleasantries. This letter is a circular warning, basically a written sermon. It is for all of the churches affected by this heresy.

John doesn't mess around. He cuts right to the heart of the Gnostic heresy – the person of Christ. Here he declares the foundational truths of the deity and humanity of Jesus of Nazareth from His conception to His death and that there is no other source of life – temporal life or eternal life.

² Iain Murray, *The Forgotten Spurgeon*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1973) pp. 112-113.

At first sight, this is a daunting couple of verses. In fact, in the Greek, the first two and a half verses form one long sentence. But as those of you who took English Refresher know, the way to get to the heart of what John is saying is to find the subject and verb.

The subject and verb is actually one Greek word in verse 3 – translated ‘we proclaim.’ What is it that John is proclaiming? – It is a number of truths concerning the Word of Life.

The key to understanding this section is the identity of this Word of Life. Basically, there are two main views as to what this Word of Life can be.

The first view is that this refers to Christ – the incarnate Word – the Word made flesh. Supporting this is the verbs ‘heard, seen, looked at, touched.’ It is hard to handle hear, see and touch the gospel. And the whole concept of Christ as the Word found throughout the writings of John support this understanding.

The second view is that the phrase ‘Word of Life’ refers not to Jesus but to the gospel He brought. It is the gospel John is fighting for. It is the gospel which brings life.

In other words, does this refer to Jesus Himself or the message preached about Him?

It is incredible how many pages are spent in the commentaries debating this point. Is it Christ? – Is it the gospel?

But there is no need for debate. The point of this passage is that Christ **is** the gospel incarnate. He is the living Word. This means that we cannot separate Christ from the gospel. That is why in 1 Corinthians 1:23, Paul says:

We preach Christ crucified.

Paul preached Christ, the living gospel. It is impossible to isolate Christ made flesh from the good news that saves. This was John’s point in both his gospel and his epistles. He also made the same point in his apocalypse. Look over at Revelation 19:11-13. Here we see Christ revealed in His full majesty and splendour:

And I saw heaven opened; and behold, a white horse, and He who sat upon it *is* called Faithful and True; and in righteousness He judges and wages war. And His eyes *are* a flame of fire, and upon His head *are* many diadems; and He has a name written *upon Him* which no one knows except Himself. And *He is* clothed with a robe dipped in blood; and His name is called **The Word of God**.

Christ **is** the Word of God. He is the Word of Life. He is the gospel. Clearly this passage refers to Christ and the good news that His coming into our world offers.

So what is it that John wants to tell us about Christ the living gospel? 1 John 1:1:

What was from the beginning.

Here we come to the second major stumbling block in terms of understanding this passage. What 'beginning' is spoken of? Is it creation? Is it eternity past? Is it the incarnation of Christ? Or simply the beginning of the ministry of Christ?

Many point to John 1:1:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Here the point is that Christ, the Word, existed at creation, indeed He was the agent through which the creation occurred.

But there are two very specific differences between John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1. In John 1, verse 3 gives us the reference to creation. The context specifically speaks of creation. **Nothing** in 1 John speaks of creation.

Also, the preposition is quite different. John 1:1 says – **In** the beginning. It echoes Genesis 1:1. It speaks of the whole period of initial creation.

1 John 1:1 says – **From** the beginning. This preposition speaks of a definite time.

Some have therefore said that the reference is not to creation but to eternity past. But, two things weigh heavily against this. First the preposition **from** speaks of a definite beginning in time. It is not a preposition that speaks of timeless eternity.

Second and more weighty is the context. Verse one has four clauses describing the Word of Life. The other three clearly speak of the incarnation. The context is Christ becoming a man – taking on flesh. The context gives us the setting. Not eternity past, but when Christ became flesh.

The context also eliminates the other possibility – this is not speaking of the beginning of Christ's ministry. That is never in view here.

That this is the true interpretation comes when we realise that in 1 John, this phrase 'from the beginning' is used eight times. Each time it speaks of the beginning of a definite period of time in history. What time in history is made clear in the context. Sometimes the beginning referred to is creation, sometimes the beginning is the Word becoming flesh.

So the context of verse 1 is the time when Christ left heaven to become man.

OK Lloyd, cut through the technical stuff and tell us the so what. What John is doing here is declaring that Christ, God, the word of Life, became flesh in the womb of Mary. There was a definite time in human history when the eternal became temporal. When God who is spirit became flesh. A time when God could be heard, seen, looked at and touched.

Why start off the epistle this way? Well, remember what we looked at last time. The Gnostics could not fathom God becoming man. They rejected outright the concept of God taking on human flesh.

There were two main branches of Gnosticism. Docetic Gnosticism taught that Christ only seemed to have a human body; His supposed humanity was in fact a phantom.

Another branch was Cerinthian Gnosticism. They held that “the Christ” came on the man Jesus of Nazareth at His baptism and empowered His ministry, but left Him before His crucifixion.

Both of these heresies deny that Jesus of Nazareth was God. He was a just a man and not deity.

The Gnostics drew a very sharp distinction between the historical MAN Jesus of Nazareth and the eternal GOD, Christ.

John counters that. Jesus of Nazareth was God from the moment of His conception. There was never a time when He was not God. Never a time when the Spirit of Christ came upon the man Jesus.

The Docetic Gnostics taught that Christ never had a human body. These verses counteract that claim. He had a flesh and blood body that could be heard, seen, looked at and touched. From the womb, He was fully man.

The Cerinthian Gnostics are also countered. The eternal life, the Word of Life, He who was with the Father – He took on flesh and blood. He did not just inhabit a body. He was fully man from His conception, throughout His life.

John starts here because if this doctrine is denied, then we deny the death of Christ for our sins. This is a gospel without an atoning death of Christ and without a resurrection. And verses 3 and 4 – the result is that there is no way to have fellowship with the Father and the Son and no way to have the joy of salvation.

Next time we will look more carefully at these precious verses. But in them we find one of the basic underlying truths that saves. God became man to die for us.

This is the gospel in its rawest form. But we struggle to accept it. Why? Why?

Because we struggle to grasp the awesome realities of this truth.

God is beyond our ability to even comprehend. He is eternal – we live in time. He created all things – we are a mere creation. He is sinless – we are totally depraved.

The more realise who God is and who we are, the more we struggle to grasp how God could ever send His own beloved Son – co-equal, co-eternal God – to die for us. Such love and sacrifice is beyond our ability to grasp.

I have to admit that the thought of Almighty God loving sinful, insignificant me enough to become human and die in my place just overloads my circuits.

It is this overwhelming sense of amazement the Charles Wesley expresses so well:

And can it be that I should gain
An int'rest in the Saviour's blood?
Died He for me, who caused His pain?
For me, who Him to death pursued?
Amazing love! how can it be
That Thou, my God shouldst die for me?

This amazement leads sinful man to declare – No! It cannot be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood. It is beyond comprehension.

So we change the gospel. Some lower God. We are gods like Him. Or we deny that God so loved the world that He gave His only beloved Son. He didn't become flesh. He didn't die. We change salvation to say that we do something to merit eternal life. And finally, when we have done this, we have a gospel that sits palatably with us.

But, this is no gospel. It is a lie. An old, old lie. A lie that *cannot* save. John knows the truth. Your sin is such a stench in the nostrils of God that *only* one thing will appease His wrath. The sacrifice of the sinless Son. And the love of God is as almighty as every other attribute of His. So, He sent Christ. He became man. He died to ransom us from our sins. And yes, we do not merit such love, cannot add to such love and will never comprehend such love.

But that is the gospel. Alter it and you change a central truth in the plank of salvation.

None of us can wrap our mind around such love.

But we don't have to understand this love, just to accept it. Accept the love that God so freely offers. 1 John 4:16:

We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.

God is love. God is love.

God created us for a love relationship. Not to jump through hoops. Not to forever question our salvation. Simply to accept the free offer of love personified in the flesh as Jesus Christ.

When we accept this incredible gift, **then** the Spirit of God begins a good work in us that continues until the day of Christ Jesus. We know whom we have believed. We see His fruit in our life. And we can sing the praises of our glorious Redeemer. 1 John is a book of hope and comfort. May it bring all the joy and peace of Christ to your hearts as we work our way through it.