

## Who does “we” refer to in 1 John chapter 1?

Pay careful attention to the use of **pronouns** in 1 John. John is very precise in the manner with which he selects personal pronouns to refer to people.

This includes

“we”

“you”

“I”

“they”/“these”

“the one”

Each pronoun refers to a distinct group of people.

For example, “**you**” always refers to the audience consisting of **believers**.

“**they**” always refers to **the false apostles**. (see 1 John 2:19)

Let’s follow the use of “we” in 1 John chapter 1.

**Verse 1:** “We” are people who have seen the Word of Life – our Lord Jesus Christ who is the Word made flesh (John 1:14) –with their own eyes. They are the people who touched our Lord Jesus Christ with their hands.

Important fact: our Lord Jesus Christ ascended into heaven 40 days after He rose from the dead and has not been on earth in bodily form since then (with the possible exception of His appearance to Paul). Paul gives us the record of people who could qualify:

1 Cor 15:3-8

3 For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. 6 After that He appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; 7 then He appeared to James, then to all the apostles; 8 and last of all, as to one untimely born, He appeared to me also.

**Verse 4:** “we” are the men (or man) who wrote the epistle of 1 John.

This narrows the field even more. So “we” in verses 1-4 refer to the apostle John and his most trusted companions and fellow leaders who had been with him from the very beginning.

We know almost nothing about John’s associates, unlike those of Paul whom Paul mentions in almost every one of his epistles, and who are identified as well in the book of Acts.

We simply know that John was mentioned with Peter and James as the leaders of the Jerusalem church and the apostles to the Jews.

Gal 2:7-9

7 But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised 8 (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), 9 and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised.

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The writer of 2 John and 3 John, presumed also to be the apostle John, mentions two close associates who appear to be fellow elders: Gaius (3 John 1) and Demetrius (3 John 12)

**Verses 2 & 3:** the writer(s) are “we” and the audience is “you”. The writers proclaim Christ and eternal life to the audience so the writers’ joy may be made complete.

Here we have additional evidence that “we”, the writers of 1 John, are leaders who have responsibility for the spiritual well-being of the believers addressed as “you” in this letter.

**Verse 5:** “We” heard a message from God. This marks “we” as apostles.

**Bottom Line:** “we” in verses 1-5 refers to **apostles**.

But then we arrive at verses 6-10.....

Put yourself in the shoes of the assembly of believers who listened to this message in the first century.

If an apostle were to say that he had fellowship with God....and yet walked in the darkness!

This would shock the audience out of their seats!

How could an apostle be said to be walking in the darkness when that describes the unbeliever?

How could an apostle not be practicing the truth?

This alerts the audience that there is a conflict that needs to be resolved.

Simply put, there are now two kinds of “we” – the true and the false apostles. The audience needs to be able to detect who’s who. So John gives them the tools to do so.

Several observations will really help us tease out the identify of “we” in verses 6-10:

1. In this section, the crisis involves people are speaking the truth, walking in truth – believers, and other people who are speaking lies, walking in lies – unbelievers.
2. By beginning with himself and other true apostles, what John has done is to have depicted the starkest contrast possible for evaluating the true nature of the false apostles. He does this by rhetorically attributing their words to him (and the other co-writers of this epistle). The audience would have immediately been taken aback by this jarring contrast.
3. The best way to spot the fraud is to line it right up against the genuine.
4. When it comes to discerning false teachers from authentic messengers, what people say reveals who they are.

Matt 7:15-20

15 "Beware of the **false prophets**, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves. 16 "You will know them by their fruits. Grapes are not gathered from thorn bushes nor figs from thistles, are they? 17 "So every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. 18 "A good tree cannot produce bad fruit, nor can a bad tree produce good fruit. 19 " Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 20 "So then, you will know them by their fruits.

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Matt 12:33-37

33 "Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. 34 " You brood of vipers, how can you, being evil, speak what is good? For **the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart.** 35 " The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. 36 "But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. 37 "For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned."

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5. In 1 John, the people who “confess” are believers while the liars are unbelievers. See 1 John 2:22-23 (thanks to Marc for point this out)
6. The subjunctive is the mood of **uncertainty**. The conditionals in 1 John 1:6-10 express uncertainty as to category. The uncertainty in each verse is this: who is included in the “we”? this is **uncertainty of identity**, not moment by moment status.

John is saying, isn't it true that if we the true apostles were to say that we have fellowship with God and yet we actually walked in the darkness (all the evidence about us points to the fact that we are unbelievers) , it would demonstrate that we were lying and not practicing the truth.

Again and again in this letter, John will contrast what the false apostles say to who they really are. Liars, those not practicing the truth, deceivers, not having God's word in them, haters of the brethren

1 John is similar to a television game show that was very popular in the 50s and 60s. It was called “To Tell the Truth”. The show featured a panel of four celebrities whose job was to correctly identify a contestant who had an unusual occupation or experience, The true character was accompanied by two impostors who pretended to be the true character. The panel would question the three contestants: the impostors were allowed to lie, but the true character had to tell the truth. Based on the answers from all three contestants, the panel voted on who was telling the truth – who was the real deal.

Verses 6, 8, and 10 are “questions” or tests that would unmask the false apostles.

Verses 7 and 9 are tests that reveal who the true apostles are.

Five tests that sort out who the real “We” is....and who is really “they”.