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SESSION ONE

1 John 1:1—2:2

Learner Session Guide

Focus Statement

When we discover who Jesus is, we better understand who we are.

Key Verse

But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world. [1 John 2:1-2](#)

Who Is Jesus—Really?

Focus Image



Crucifixion of Jesus, painting detail. Saint Joseph Patron Church, Brooklyn, NY. © age fotostock / SuperStock

Gather

Check-in

This is a time for introductions and reconnections! We are about to begin two conversations, one with each other and another with the Book of Faith. Prior knowledge of 1 John is not needed—just open hearts, open minds, and a desire to open Scripture and join the conversation!

Pray

Gracious God, thank you for sending your Son Jesus to meet us just as we are. Loving God, send down your Holy Spirit on us as we gather to hear your Word of life. Open our eyes to see you. Open our ears to hear you. Open our hands to touch you. Open our hearts to love you. Open our lives to walk in the light of your Son Jesus. Amen.

Focus Activity

Look at the title of this session. In one minute or less, write down any one-word answers to the question **“Who is Jesus?”**

SESSION ONE



Open Scripture

Read 1 John 1:1—2:2.

- What words or phrases in the text touched you?
- What images stood out?
- What questions were raised?

Join the Conversation

Historical Context

1. The writer of 1 John was very concerned about choosing just the right words for his letter. And it's amazing to think that a letter written so long ago is so packed with meaning. Though we don't know exactly who the writer of 1 John was, the message of the letter makes it clear he was trying to speak about what he believed was true and essential.

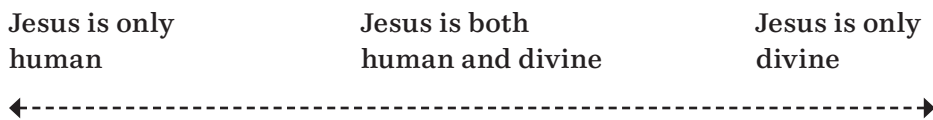
- As you explore today's text again, identify the thing that the writer seems to say is true and essential.
- Imagine the writer's intended readers. How do you picture them as they read the opening chapter of the letter for the first time?

2. You may have already discovered that the writer wanted to say something about Jesus. What may not be so clear in this first chapter is that the letter was likely written in response to false teaching that was threatening the community of faith. The writer needed to clear up some things. Not everything that everyone in the community was saying about Jesus was true.

Some false teachers may have been following a Greek teaching known as Docetism (from the Greek word *dokeo*, meaning “to seem” or “to appear”). Docetism included these beliefs:

- The spiritual world was considered to be separate from the material world.
- The material world, including human flesh, was corrupt, while the spiritual world was pure.
- Salvation is gained by escaping from the prison of this world into the supernatural world.
- The infinite or divine cannot be contained in finite or human form.
- God, being holy and infinite, would not become human and could not suffer or die.

After reviewing 1 John 1:1—2:2, mark an X the continuum line where you think the writer places Jesus' nature. Then write a D where you think a Docetist would mark the continuum. Think carefully, the answer is a bit tricky.



3. To those who followed Docetic thinking, the human Jesus wasn't the same as the divine or spiritual Jesus, so his death had no value for salvation. How does that line of thinking seem to differ with the message of 1 John 1:1—2:2? What words and images in John's letter seem to address the claims of Docetism?

Literary Context

1. The Bible is made up of different kinds of writings, including stories, songs, pieces used in worship, and letters. Although 1 John is typically referred to as a letter (or epistle), it doesn't have a formal greeting, salutation, or closing. First John is structured more like a sermon or essay designed to correct and teach God's people.

- Read 1 John 1:1-4 again. In your own words, why was 1 John written?

2. Look again at today's reading. List the words that have to do with human senses, human physical attributes, and human nature. List the words that have to do with Jesus. Compare the lists.

- What words describe Jesus' humanity?
- What words describe his divine nature?

3. Notice how the writer also makes use of images of darkness and light. What do you think it means to "walk in the light" or to be "walking in darkness"?





Simul = “simultaneously”

Justis = “justified”

Et = “and”

Peccator = “sinful”

Lutheran Context

1. Let’s look at two Lutheran principles to explore today’s text further. We use “Scripture to interpret Scripture.” Passages in one part of the Bible shed light on the meaning of other passages. And we look for how “Scripture points us to Christ.” Form three groups, one group per passage. Look up your group’s passage and respond to the questions. Share your ideas.

John 1:1-18

Galatians 2:19-21

Romans 6:1-14

- How do these texts support the message of 1 John 1:1—2:2?
- In your own words, can you explain how the passage you looked up reveals who Jesus is—really?

2. In *Opening the Book of Faith*, Mark Allan Powell states: “The *law* is that which accuses us and judges; the *gospel* is that which comforts and saves us. This message of law and gospel is at the heart of Scripture: faithful interpretation discerns this message; faithful proclamation declares this message” (Augsburg Fortress, p. 29). With this definition in mind, describe the interplay of *law* and *gospel* in 1 John 1:1—2:2.

- How do the two work together to lead the reader to Christ?
- With one or two others, discuss the following two questions: What do you hear the *law* speaking to you through this text? What do you hear the *gospel* speaking to you through this text?

3. Note the definition in the margin. It was a key to Martin Luther’s understanding of human nature.

Luther spoke of all baptized Christians being saints, because in baptism we are made children of God’s promise and connected to the life and death of Jesus (see Romans 6:1-4). We are saints also because we are made right with God through Christ who forgives sins. At the same time, we continue to be sinful.

- Look again at 1 John 1:8—2:2. How do these verses seem to reflect what Luther said about being saints and sinners at the same time?

Devotional Context

Our session text, 1 John 1:1—2:2, describes the saving work of Jesus and calls us to walk together in the light of Christ’s forgiveness. Consider how these themes connect to you, your life, and to others. Think about what God is saying to you through this text.

1. The writer of 1 John made a point of talking about how he (“we”) had touched and seen Jesus. If you wish, describe a time when you

touched Jesus or he touched you. What does this mean for you? Reflect upon a time in your life when you walked in darkness. How did the light of Christ appear?

2. In *Evangelical Lutheran Worship's* rite of Holy Baptism, the newly baptized are presented with a candle accompanied by either the words, "Jesus said, I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life," or the words, "Let your light so shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven" (*ELW*, p. 231).

- How might you reflect the light of Christ?
- Reflect on this statement: We are saved "for" good works, not "by" good works.

3. Look back at the Focus Image for the session on p. 5. How does that image relate to session text or to anything you have discussed so far?

4. Think about today's text in light of all we've experienced in this session:

- Relate any new thought or insight you have as a result of this experience.
- Express in a word or image who Jesus really is—to you.

Wrap-Up

Be ready to look back over the work your group has done in this session.

Pray

Ever-living God, author of creation, we give you thanks for your gift of water that brings life and refreshes the earth. We bless and praise you, for by water and the Word we are cleansed from sin and receive everlasting life. Join us again this day to the saving death of Christ; renew in us the living fountain of your grace; and raise us with Christ Jesus to live in newness of life; for you are merciful, and you love your whole creation, and with all your creatures we give you glory, through your Son Jesus Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, now and forever. Amen. (ELW, p. 307)

Extending the Conversation

Homework

1. Read the next session's Bible passage: 1 John 2:29—3:24.
2. Each day during the coming week, reread 1 John 1:1—2:2. Reflect on those dark places in your life that need to be transformed by the light of Christ. If you wish, keep a daily journal, writing about how God speaks to you through this text each day.



Notes

SESSION ONE



Notes

3. Read 1 John 2:3-29 and learn more about what it means to walk in the light.

4. Visit the Book of Faith Web site at www.bookoffaith.org. Consider creating or joining a social network and starting an online conversation on 1 John!

Enrichment

1. Sit in a dark room and light a small candle—perhaps your baptismal candle if you have one. Reflect on the effect the candle has on the darkness. How is the darkness like our lives? How is the candle like the light of Christ? Pray a prayer asking God to help you walk in the light of Christ.

2. If you have been baptized, create a poster or drawing expressing what your baptism means to you. If you haven't been baptized, ask your pastor or church staff for help in learning more about baptism or scheduling a baptism in your congregation.

3. Watch the movie *Four Christmases* (New Line Cinema, 2008) or *Walk the Line* (20th Century Fox, 2005). Where is the darkness portrayed? Where is the light portrayed? How does the light break into the darkness?

For Further Reading

Available at www.augsburgfortress.org/store:

Baptism: A User's Guide by Martin E. Marty. Discusses baptism as daily nourishment for the Christian life.

No Greater Jewel: Thinking about Baptism with Luther by Kirsi Stjerna. Provides a historical, theological, and practical review of baptism.

A Love Supreme: A History of the Johannine Tradition by Allen Dwight Callahan. A scholarly look at the works collectively known as Johannine tradition—the Gospel of John and 1, 2, and 3 John.