

First John

1 John
MSB62

Title

The epistle's title has always been "1 John." It is the first and largest in a series of 3 epistles that bear the Apostle John's name. Since the letter identifies no specific church, location, or individual to whom it was sent, its classification is as a "general epistle." Although 1 John does not exhibit some of the general characteristics of an epistle common to that time (e.g., no introduction, greeting, or concluding salutation), its intimate tone and content indicate that the term "epistle" still applies to it.

Author and Date

The epistle does not identify the author, but the strong, consistent and earliest testimony of the church ascribes it to John the disciple and apostle (cf. Luke 6:13,14). This anonymity strongly affirms the early church's identification of the epistle with John the apostle, for only someone of John's well known and preeminent status as an apostle would be able to write with such unmistakable authority, expecting complete obedience from his readers, without clearly identifying himself (e.g., 4:6). He was well known to the readers so he didn't need to mention his name.

John and James, his older brother (Acts 12:2), were known as "the sons of Zebedee" (Matt.10:2–4), whom Jesus gave the name "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). John was one of the 3 most intimate associates of Jesus (along with Peter and James—cf. Matt. 17:1; 26:37), being an eyewitness to and participant in Jesus' earthly ministry (1:1–4). In addition to the 3 epistles, John also authored the fourth gospel, in which he identified himself as the disciple "whom Jesus loved" and as the one who reclined on Jesus' breast at the Last Supper (John 13:23;19:26; 20:2; 21:7,20). He also wrote the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1).

Precise dating is difficult because no clear historical indications of date exist in 1 John. Most likely John composed this work in the latter part of the first century. Church tradition consistently identifies John in his advanced age as living and actively writing during this time at Ephesus in Asia Minor. The tone of the epistle supports this evidence since the writer gives the strong impression that he is much older than his readers (e.g., "my little children"—2:1,18,28). The epistle and John's gospel reflect similar vocabulary and manner of expression (see Historical and Theological Themes). Such similarity causes many to date the writing of

John's epistles as occurring soon after he composed his gospel. Since many date the gospel during the later part of the first century, they also prefer a similar date for the epistles. Furthermore, the heresy John combats most likely reflects the beginnings of Gnosticism (see Background and Setting)

which was in its early stages during the latter third of the first century when John was actively writing. Since no mention is made of the persecution under Domitian, which began about A.D. 95, it may have been written before that began. In light of such factors, a reasonable date for 1 John is ca. A.D. 90–95. It was likely written from Ephesus to the churches of Asia Minor over which John exercised apostolic leadership.

Background and Setting

Although he was greatly advanced in age when he penned this epistle, John was still actively ministering to churches. He was the sole remaining apostolic survivor who had intimate, eyewitness association with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. The church Fathers (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius) indicate that after that time, John lived at Ephesus in Asia Minor, carrying out an extensive evangelistic program, overseeing many of the churches that had arisen, and conducting an extensive writing ministry (e.g., epistles, The Gospel of John, and Revelation). One church Father (Papias) who had direct contact with John described him as a “living and abiding voice.” As the last remaining apostle, John’s testimony was highly authoritative among the churches. Many eagerly sought to hear the one who had first-hand experience with the Lord Jesus.

Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:10) lay within the intellectual center of Asia Minor. As predicted years before by the Apostle Paul (Acts 20:28–31), false teachers arising from within the church’s own ranks, saturated with the prevailing climate of philosophical trends, began infecting the church with false doctrine, perverting fundamental apostolic teaching. These false teachers advocated new ideas which eventually became known as “Gnosticism” (from the Gr. word “knowledge”). After the Pauline battle for freedom from the law, Gnosticism was the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first 3 centuries. Most likely, John was combating the beginnings of this virulent heresy that threatened to destroy the fundamentals of the faith and the churches (see Interpretive Challenges).

Gnosticism, influenced by such philosophers as Plato, advocated a dualism asserting that matter was inherently evil and spirit was good. As a result of this presupposition, these false teachers, although attributing some form of deity to Christ, denied his true humanity to preserve Him from evil. It also claimed elevated knowledge, a higher truth known only to those in on the deep things. Only the initiated had the mystical knowledge of truth that was higher even than the Scripture

Instead of divine revelation standing as judge over man’s ideas, man’s ideas judged God’s revelation (2:15–17). The heresy featured two basic forms. First, some asserted that Jesus’ physical body was not real but only “seemed” to be physical (known as “Docetism” from a Gr. word that means “to appear”). John forcefully affirmed the physical reality of Jesus by reminding his readers that he was an eyewitness to Him (“heard,” “seen,” “ handled,” “JesusChrist has come in the flesh”—1:1–4; 4:2,3). According to early tradition (Irenaeus), another form of this heresy which John may have attacked was led by a man named Cerinthus, who contended that the Christ’s “spirit” descended on the human Jesus at his baptism but left him just before his crucifixion. John wrote that the Jesus who was baptized at the beginning of His ministry was the same person who was crucified on the cross (5:6).

Such heretical views destroy not only the true humanity of Jesus, but also the atonement, for Jesus must not only have been truly God, but also the truly human (and physically real) man who actually suffered and died upon the cross in order to be the acceptable substitutionary sacrifice for sin (cf. Heb. 2:14–17). The biblical view of Jesus affirms His complete humanity as well as His full deity.

The gnostic idea that matter was evil and only spirit was good led to the idea that either the body should be treated harshly, a form of asceticism (e.g., Colossians 2:21–23), or sin committed in the body had no connection or effect on one's spirit. This led some, especially John's opponents, to conclude that sin committed in the physical body did not matter; absolute indulgence in immorality was permissible; one could deny sin even existed (1:8–10) and disregard God's law (3:4). John emphasized the need for obedience to God's laws, for he defined the true love of God as obedience to His commandments (5:3).

A lack of love for fellow believers characterizes false teachers, especially as they react against anyone rejecting their new way of thinking (3:10–18). They separated their deceived followers from the fellowship of those who remained faithful to apostolic teaching, leading John to reply that such separation outwardly manifested that those who followed false teachers lacked genuine salvation (2:19). Their departure left the other believers, who remained faithful to apostolic doctrine, shaken. Responding to this crisis, the aged apostle wrote to reassure those remaining faithful and to combat this grave threat to the church. Since the heresy was so acutely dangerous and the time period was so critical for the church in danger of being overwhelmed by false teaching, John gently, lovingly, but with unquestionable apostolic authority, sent this letter to churches in his sphere of influence to stem this spreading plague of false doctrine.

Historical and Theological Themes

In light of the circumstances of the epistle, the overall theme of 1 John is “a recall to the fundamentals of the faith” or “back to the basics of Christianity.” The apostle deals with certainties, not opinions or conjecture. He expresses the absolute character of Christianity in very simple terms; terms that are clear and unmistakable, leaving no doubt as to the fundamental nature of those truths. A warm, conversational, and above all, loving tone occurs, like a father having a tender, intimate conversation with his children.

First John also is pastoral, written from the heart of a pastor who has concern for his people. As a shepherd, John communicated to his flock some very basic, but vitally essential, principles reassuring them regarding the basics of the faith. He desired them to have joy regarding the certainty of their faith rather than being upset by the false teaching and current defections of some (1:4).

The book's viewpoint, however, is not only pastoral but also polemical; not only positive but also negative. John's refutes the defectors from sound doctrine, exhibiting no tolerance for those who pervert divine truth. He labels those departing from the truth as “false prophets” (4:1), “those who try to deceive” (2:26; 3:7), and “antichrists” (2:18). He pointedly identifies the ultimate source of all such defection from sound doctrine as demonic (4:1–7).

The constant repetition of 3 sub-themes reinforces the overall theme regarding faithfulness to the basics of Christianity: happiness (1:4), holiness (2:1), and security (5:13). By faithfulness to the

basics, his readers will experience these 3 results continually in their lives. These 3 factors also reveal the key cycle of true spirituality in 1 John: a proper belief in Jesus produces obedience to His commands; obedience issues in love for God and fellow believers (e.g., 3:23,24). When these 3 (sound faith, obedience, love) operate in concert together, they result in happiness, holiness and assurance. They constitute the evidence, the litmus test, of a true Christian.

Interpretive Challenges

Theologians debate the precise nature of the false teachers' beliefs in 1 John, because John does not directly specify their beliefs, but rather combats the heretics mainly through a positive restatement of the fundamentals of the faith. The main feature of the heresy, as noted above, seems to be a denial of the incarnation, i.e., Christ had not come in the flesh. This was most likely an incipient or beginning form of Gnosticism, as was pointed out.

The interpreter is also challenged by the rigidity of John's theology. John presents the basics or fundamentals of the Christian life in absolute, not relative, terms. Unlike Paul, who presented exceptions, and dealt so often with believers' failures to meet the divine standard, John does not deal with the "what if I fail" issues. Only in 2:1,2 does he give some relief from the absolutes. The rest of the book presents truths in black and white rather than shades of gray, often through a stark contrast, e.g., "light" vs. "darkness" (1:5,7; 2:8–11); truth vs. lies (2:21,22; 4:1); children of God vs. children of the devil (3:10). Those who claim to be Christians must absolutely display the characteristics of genuine Christians: sound doctrine, obedience, and love. Those who are truly born again have been given a new nature, which gives evidence of itself. Those who do not display characteristics of the new nature don't have it, so were never truly born again. The issues do not center (as much of Paul's writing does) in maintaining temporal or daily fellowship with God but the application of basic tests in one's life to confirm that salvation has truly occurred. Such absolute distinctions were also characteristic of John's gospel.

In a unique fashion, John challenges the interpreter by his repetition of similar themes over and over to emphasize the basic truths about genuine Christianity. Some have likened John's repetition to a spiral that moves outward, becoming larger and larger, each time spreading the same truth over a wider area and encompassing more territory. Others have seen the spiral as moving inward, penetrating deeper and deeper into the same themes while expanding on his thoughts. However one views the spiraling pattern, John uses repetition of basic truths as a means to accentuate their importance and to help his readers understand and remember them.

Outline

I. The Fundamental Tests of Genuine Fellowship—SPIRAL I (1:1–2:17)

A. The Fundamental Tests of Doctrine (1:1–2:2)

1. A biblical view of Christ (1:1–4)
2. A biblical view of sin (1:5–2:2)

B. The Fundamental Tests of Morals (2:3–17)

1. A biblical view of obedience (2:3–6)

2. A biblical view of love (2:7–17)

a. The love that God requires (2:7–11)

b. The love that God hates (2:12–17)

II. The Fundamental Tests of Genuine Fellowship—SPIRAL II (2:18–3:24)

A. Part 2 of the Doctrinal Test (2:18–27)

1. Antichrists depart from Christian fellowship (2:18–21)

2. Antichrists deny the Christian faith (2:22–25)

3. Antichrists deceive the Christian faithful (2:26, 27)

B. Part 2 of the Moral Test (2:28–3:24)

1. The purifying hope of the Lord's return (2:28–3:3)

2. The Christian's incompatibility with sin (3:4–24)

a. The requirement of righteousness (3:4–10)

b. The requirement of love (3:11–24)

III. The Fundamental Tests of Genuine Fellowship—SPIRAL III (4:1–21)

A. Part 3 of the Doctrinal Test (4:1–6)

1. The demonic source of false doctrine (4:1–3)

2. The need for sound doctrine (4:4–6)

B. Part 3 of the Moral Test (4:7–21)

1. God's character of love (4:7–10)

2. God's requirement of love (4:11–21)

IV. The Fundamental Tests of Genuine Fellowship—SPIRAL IV (5:1–21)

A. The Victorious Life in Christ (5:1–5)

B. The Witness of God for Christ (5:6–12)

C. Christian Certainties Because of Christ (5:13–21)

1. The certainty of eternal life (5:13)

2. The certainty of answered prayer (5:14–17)

3. The certainty of victory over sin and Satan (5:18–21)

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