

1 John

Introduction and Chapter One

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Introduction

There have been some challenges to the identity of the author but most scholars agree that there is no substantial evidence to doubt that the author of the gospel and of the epistles is the same person. Some challenges regarding the Greek grammar could be explained if the epistles were first written in Aramaic and then translated into Greek but that also seems unlikely. The date of writing also seems rather certain to be toward the end of the first century. It is not known if John was writing to a single congregation or to several congregations in the area.

The first question to ask when studying any book is “What was the purpose the author had for writing the book?” We read one answer to this question from the author: “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.” (1 John 5:13) We see then that the letter was written to Christians and a purpose was so that they might know that they are God’s children and thus possessors of eternal life. It was not written to unbelievers but to believers. John wanted them to have assurance of their salvation. This is a different audience than to whom John was writing in his gospel: “but these have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you may have life in His name.” (John 20:31) John wrote this letter with this purpose because some of the members of the original congregation were leaving and forming a new “denomination” saying that their new understanding was superior to that of the original. John writes about these: “They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, in order that it might be shown that they all are not of us.” (1 John 2:19) Such a breaking away of members would have raised questions among the original members about the truth of their beliefs and so John writes to encourage them that the original gospel message was correct and did not require corrective measures.

What seemed to be inflicting damage to this congregation was an early form of Gnosticism. It is critical for proper interpretation of the letters to understand this attack and that John was refuting the teaching of these heretics. The word “Gnostic” means “the knowing ones”. They thought that they had a more intellectual understanding of God than the people simply following the gospel as taught in the four gospels. They adopted the Greek philosophy that matter is evil and only the spirit is good so obviously the Son of God could not have come in human form but rather the Spirit came upon this man Jesus and left just before the crucifixion. Christianity to them then was a set of ideas of a philosophy of life. Most of the followers of this philosophy thought that there was no importance to a pure moral existence since all matter was evil. These false teachers believed that they had reached a new spiritual level so that they were now without sin. They stated this not because they were morally pure but because they had

attained a new spiritual level that was beyond any judgment of sin regarding their physical bodies. Their teachings totally subverted the gospel upon which the church was based. Thus their religion was not based upon the history of the life of Jesus but on concepts that only those devoted to a higher intellectual pursuit of searching for truth could understand.

However they usually insisted that there was no absolute truth but that truth depended upon the individual and his circumstances in life. John taught that there actually was an absolute truth based upon the life and teachings of Jesus Christ. We will see that John taught that Christians must not just have an intellectual understanding of Christianity but they must love each other as taught by Jesus: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another."By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35)

Thus it is critical that Christianity be based upon the historical truth of the total message represented by Jesus Christ as the Son of God and that the followers of His would be marked by their love for each other. John also recorded the words of Jesus regarding this love and oneness of His true disciples: "I do not ask in behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; that they may all be one; even as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that Thou didst send Me.” (John 17:20-21) Obviously people leaving a congregation to form a new one based upon later revelations than recorded in the four gospels will not be in oneness with others who accept only the true message. Such a false belief system tells the world that God did not send Jesus and so there are many ways to God as taught by many people today.

The false teachers left the congregation of believers and may have even accused those remaining to be committing sin against the Holy Spirit by not accepting their teachings. Those remaining were shaken by this activity and needed reassurance from John that they were the ones with the true gospel and not those who left the church. John provides the preaching (kerygma) and the teaching (didache) needed by the flock remaining after the desertion by the false teachers. The heading of this first epistle of John could be called “A Refresher of the Fundamentals” and is essential reading for all Christians today as attacks continue against Christianity. The content of the letter can be outlined as by F. F. Bruce¹ to give us a guide to understanding it.

1. Prologue (1. 1-4)
2. Walking in Light (1.5-2.2)
 - a. The character of God (1.5)
 - b. Three antithetic tests of life (1.6-2.2)
3. The New Commandment (2.3-17)
 - a. The test of obedience (2.3-6)
 - b. The test of love (2.7-11)
 - c. Encouragement to three age-groups (2.12-14)

¹ F. F. Bruce “The Gospel & Epistles of John”, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983.

- d. Warning against the world (2.15-17)
- 4. The Teaching of Antichrist (2.18-27)
 - a. Many antichrists (2.18)
 - b. The test of perseverance (2.19)
 - c. Distinguishing truth and error (2.20-27)
- 5. Children of God (2.28-3.24)
 - a. The two families (2.28-3.10)
 - b. The test of love (3.11-18)
 - c. Christian confidence (3.19-24)
- 6. The Two Spirits (4.1-6)
- 7. Walking in Love (4.7-21)
 - a. In praise of love (4.7-12)
 - b. Perfect love and sound doctrine (4.13-21)
- 8. The Victory of Faith (5.1-5)
- 9. The Ground of Assurance (5.6-12)
- 10. Epilogue (5.13-21)

This study will continue by first examining the prologue to the letter as marked by the first four verses.

Chapter One

Prologue

1John 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 begins with a proclamation of the essence of the system of Christianity and that is Jesus. Since in the gospel John uses the Word to refer to Jesus, it is easy to assume that he uses the same nomenclature here. However he uses Life as meaning Jesus and the Word as the gospel message as is clear from the rest of the sentence. As he is writing to a generation past the life of Jesus he must make it clear that Jesus is a real historical person. He begins with objective proof and will proceed to subjective proof. He says that the apostles heard, saw, and held Jesus. He begins by stating that the apostles heard the very words of Jesus. His speech was proclaimed as very special: "The officers answered, "Never did a man speak the way this man speaks." (John 7:46) Jesus also proclaimed that those who actually heard His message were blessed: "But blessed are your eyes, because they see; and your ears, because they hear. For truly I say to you,

that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see, and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it.” (Matt 13:16-17) The second objective reason for the existence of a historical Jesus was that the apostles saw Him. John uses the Greek word *horao* for “saw”, which means “to see with understanding” so that John knew that Jesus was the Son of God. This word is also used in the quotation of Jesus from Matt 13:16-17. The third reason was that the apostles touched Him and this is the most intimate experience they had and what Jesus told them to do: “See My hands and My feet, that it is I Myself; touch Me and see, for a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have.” (Luke 24:39) John then is telling his audience that Jesus was objectively known by the apostles and so was a historical person.

He then states that Jesus (the life) was made known to them and that this life had been eternally with the Father. The apostles all bear witness to this fact of the incarnation of the Son of God and they are making this proclamation to the recipients of this letter so that they may have fellowship with them. John proclaims that they even have fellowship with the Father and with His son, Jesus Christ. John is writing all this so that their joy may be complete. It is not enough to verify that Jesus was a real historical person Who is the Son of God but they must also have fellowship with all believers. Jesus also emphasized this joy among believers: “These things I have spoken to you, that My joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” (John 15:11) Christianity is not just a set of rules or some philosophy but it is a relationship with God and with fellow believers.

Message from Jesus

1John 1:5-10 And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth; but if we walk in the light as He Himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin. 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. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.

John announces that Jesus gave the apostles a message and he is revealing that message to the recipients. The message actually defines God: He is light and there is no darkness in Him at all. Why does he begin the message in this manner? Just previously John had said that fellowship with other Christians and with God was of primary importance. Now he gives the message from Jesus concerning God that is required for this fellowship. Most discussions about God state attributes of Him but do not really define Him. The Westminster Shorter Catechism #4 says “God is a Spirit, infinite, eternal, and unchangeable, in his being, wisdom, power, holiness, justice, goodness, and truth.” This tells us about God but it does not define God. John certainly saw this as a problem with the people leaving the congregation of believers so he defines God:

“God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4:24)

“And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light, and in Him there is no darkness at all.” (1 John 1:5)

“The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:8)

John tells us that God is spirit, light, and love. Then to have fellowship with God one must also be spirit and walk in light and love. To be spirit one must be born again: “Jesus answered and said to him, Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.” (John 3:3) As proof of having been born again, the Christian will walk in the light and show love: “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13:34-35) John then elaborates on walking in light in the above verses. Paul tells the Christians at Ephesus that they are light in the Lord: “for you were formerly darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light.” (Eph 5:8) Being light in the Lord is a statement of double imputation in that, before God, Christians are without sin and possess the holiness of Jesus. When Paul tells them to walk as children of light he is telling them to practice sanctification as they work out their salvation in their walk in the world.

John elaborates on walking in the light because those false teachers who left the church are walking in the darkness. Only if Christians walk in the light of God’s revelation can they have fellowship with John and other Christians and know that they have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus. Remember the Gnostics taught that they had achieved a spiritual state in which they were without sin even if their bodies still practiced sin. So John is telling the remaining congregation of believers that those who say they have no sin are lying. They must admit that they are not in some higher spiritual state but are responsible for the actions of their minds and bodies. John promises them that by admitting they still sin but do not practice sin God will forgive them and cleanse them through the process of sanctification. Those who say that they have not sinned are essentially saying that the sacrifice of Jesus was without purpose and that makes God a liar. The Gnostics claimed that they could be sinless spiritually and still practice a sinful life style. John uses the present tense (walk in the darkness) to state that such is a practice and not an occasional sin. John changes to the aorist tense when he states “we have not sinned” (1 John 1:10). Such a statement is a blatant lie and even says that God lies for God states: “for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,” (Rom 3:23) Thus for such people the word of God is not in them.

A person who truly walks in the light will be conscious daily of his sin and will have a strong desire to be cleansed of all sin. It is not that the person will begin to think of himself as without sin for actually he will be more and more conscious of his sin nature and a dependence upon God for the need of daily cleansing: “And He was saying to them all, If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross daily, and follow Me.” (Luke 9:23)