

Introduction to I John

Monday, November 10, 2014
12:27 PM

To Read:

1. Psalm 104
2. Jeremiah 31:31-34

I. Introduction and Background

A. Who wrote the book?

1. The book is technically anonymous and there is much scholarly argument about who wrote the book of I John
2. I'm not going to address those arguments this morning, but I believe that the best understanding of this book is the understanding handed down to us by tradition, that this was a letter from the Apostle John
3. And there are three reasons that I think we can confidently affirm this:
 - a. First, tradition is nearly unanimous in ascribing this letter to the Apostle John, and without overwhelming evidence we ought to accept the witness of the believers before us
 - b. Second, the language and themes are extremely similar to John's gospel again testifying to his authorship
 - c. Third, if John didn't write this book, then we have a problem of authority - why should it be Scripture if the apostle isn't the one giving testimony to Christ?
4. So, in short, I would affirm that I John was written by the Apostle John, the writer of the Gospel of John

B. When was it written?

1. Again, there are few pointers in the book to tell us when it was written and there is some argument over this
2. It is likely that the book was written toward the end of the first century since the heresies that John addresses are different than those Paul addressed earlier and are starting to look more like the second century
3. So dates for the book might range from 80-95 A.D. give or take a few years

C. To whom was it written?

1. Once again, the book is silent on this point, but assuming our points above are correct it was likely written to churches under John's authority at the end of the first century
2. Tradition tells us that toward the end of his life, John ministered in the church in Ephesus, so this book may be written to the Ephesian church and other churches in Asia Minor
3. In other words, the recipients may be similar to the addressed churches in Revelation, another of John's books

D. Why was it written?

1. This is a little easier to piece together because John addresses some heresies that were popping up
2. There was apparently an early split in the churches under John's authority, some denied the central truths of John's gospel and John's authority as an apostle
3. These dissenters seemed to have an early form of Gnostic teachings - claiming that they had a secret knowledge from God that John and his disciples didn't possess
4. These dissenters claiming a better knowledge confused many early believers - should they follow the apostles' gospel or those who had a 'better' revelation?
5. In response to this confusion, the apostle John reasserts the basis of his authority - his time with Christ, and reminds them of the truths of the gospel that they heard from the beginning
6. And then the bulk of the letter is a contrast between the results of the gospel and the results of the dissenters teaching - we know the true gospel by the outcomes that it produces
7. So John's letter serves two purposes - to assure the true believer in the gospel He has believed in and to warn the false professor of the danger of his path
8. Because the specifics of the dissenters teachings are unknown, it makes this letter of great general use for all Christians in all places because these simple contrasts can always be used to determine the truth from error

II. Overview and Themes

A. Organization of I John

1. The way I understand John's writings are to contrast them with Paul's writings
 - a. Paul was a very logical thinker. His writing is marked by logical statements and defenses of those statements. There is a clear flow of argument through his books.
 - b. For these reasons, I tend to gravitate toward Paul's books. I like logical arguments, I find them convincing and understandable. But when I come to John's letters, this structure vanishes.
 - c. John on the other hand is very different. John isn't as concerned to write logical arguments in defense of the gospel (though we could draw on John's writings to do so)
 - d. Instead he is a passionate writer, calling us to feel the truths of the gospel, involving through his prose the whole man, both mind and emotion
 - e. We see this even in the introduction to the book of I John - John doesn't base his arguments on the logical facts that he has put together, his argument is based out of what he has experienced with Christ - what we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you

2. So the epistle of I John doesn't follow a strictly logical flow and any outline is not going to do it justice
 - a. Instead, John is very repetitious in his writing, coming back to the same themes over and over again with different words so that we feel the truth of what he is saying worm its way into our soul
 - b. This morning I am going to give you a brief outline of I John, so we have some idea where we are going in the book, but this isn't how the book should be understood
 - c. As we go through I John, we should value the repetitious, cyclic nature of John's writing and let it affect not only our minds but our emotions as we are caught up in the grand themes he is displaying for us
 - d. John's argument is based on his experience of Christ and our understanding of his argument must be through our experience of Jesus Christ, our living and abiding union with Him

B. Verbal Themes (words that John uses repeatedly, especially to make contrasts)

1. Light versus darkness
 - a. I John contains at least thirteen references to light and darkness
 - i. These references are centered on John's statement in I John 1:5 that "God is light!"
 - ii. So, light refers to something about the being of God, and I would say it means something like the sum of all of God's perfections - God is perfect in every way and light represents this perfection
 - iii. So, Psalm 104:1-2 says - *Bless the LORD, O my soul! O LORD my God, you are very great! You are clothed with splendor and majesty, covering yourself with light as with a garment, stretching out the heavens like a tent.*
 - iv. And Paul says in his benediction in I Timothy 6:15-16 - *He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.*
 - b. In contrast, darkness is the opposite of God's perfections, especially the lack of knowing God
 - i. Darkness is what characterized the primeval chaos before God's order in creation
 - ii. In the prophets, darkness is the lack of salvation and knowledge of God which God has to shine His light into to save His people
 - iii. By the later prophets and the New Testament, darkness has come to represent sin and God's judgment on it - that is the lack of any good, the opposite of God's perfections

2. Life versus death

- a. Related closely to light and darkness, John refers to life and death at least twenty-four times in I John
 - i. Life and light are closely related in John's thinking - in the introduction to his gospel John connects the life of Christ and the light of Christ, John 1:3 - *In him was life, and the life was the light of men.*
 - ii. So, to John, life is, in essence, knowing God rightly, John 17:3 - *And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*
 - iii. If light represents God's perfections, then our correct perception of God's glory is our life - life is knowing God rightly and sharing in His perfection - life is our partaking in the light of God
- b. In contrast, death marks those who reject the knowledge of God and do not reflect His perfections
 - i. So, instead of knowing and enjoying God, the judgment of God of death awaits those who refuse to acknowledge Christ for who He truly is - death is our participation in darkness and its full effect

3. Love versus hate

- a. If "God is light" is one anchor post in John, "God is love" is the other anchor post, so John references love and hate an amazing fifty-seven times in I John
 - i. In His perfection, God perfectly loves the right things, things that reflect the light of His perfect glory
 - ii. But God also hates the right things, things that are opposed to His glory, opposed to His being
- b. So, if God is love, a right love marks the true believer
 - i. The true believer is loved by God so that he loves God and therefore loves God's children
 - ii. And this love is not theoretical but actual, love is worked out in real deeds toward each other
 - iii. The believer is marked not only by love but also a right hate, a hatred of the world opposed to God
- c. A false love marks the false believer
 - i. The false believer fails to have a right hatred and so loves the world and the things of the world
 - ii. This love for the world is an evidence of hating God and is worked out in hating God's children
 - iii. And this hatred is practical as well, worked out in the absence of deeds of love and instead division

4. Obedience versus sin

- a. To John, love is primarily evidenced in acting in right relationship with the object of love
- b. To love Christ is to obey Him because He is rightfully our king so we keep His commandments
- c. But the relationship is circular, obedience is fueled by love but love is also fueled by obedience
- d. On the other hand, though, sin is evidence of hating Christ, refusing to act in right relationship to Him
- e. So the contrast between keeping Christ's commands and sinning are referred to at least 36 times

5. Truth versus error

- a. Truth versus error is really the theme of the entire book and the reason for the other contrasts
- b. John wants to demonstrate what is true and what is false so that the reader can follow Christ well
- c. So truth versus error is referenced 13 times, especially distinguishing between the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error - the Spirit of truth guides us into all truth, a spirit that teaches anything else is in error

C. Theological Themes (doctrines that John addresses in the book, often using the verbal themes above)

1. Christology

- a. The false teachers claimed that Jesus and Christ were different beings
 - i. Jesus was a human man who was very godly and Christ was God; at His baptism, Christ, the God, came and inhabited Jesus the man, but Jesus was never God; and now, in heaven, Christ, the God, is not a man, but only God - this was very similar to several early, heretical, gnostic teachings
- b. So, against this, John points out that both the person and the work of Christ are central to Christianity
 - i. The incarnation of Christ, that Jesus is both man and God, is at the heart of the Gospel
 - ii. And Jesus Christ's work of propitiation is what allows God and man to now have fellowship together
- c. Since both His person and His work are central to the Gospel, we can know that anyone who denies who Christ is or what He has done is an imposter

2. Pneumatology
 - a. Pneumatology is just a fancy word that means studying the work of the Holy Spirit
 - b. The false teachers claimed that they had a special knowledge that John and his followers did not
 - i. And they claimed that they received this knowledge from a special dispensation of the Holy Spirit
 - ii. So they knew better than John and could give people this special knowledge if they followed them
 - c. So, against this, John points out that the Spirit is the teacher of truth
 - i. The Spirit is a witness to Christ, He abides with us to show us the glory of Christ's person and work
 - ii. So, the Spirit will only teach us things that are in accord with who Christ is as revealed in the Gospel
 - d. Since the Spirit testifies to Christ, we can know that any spirit that teaches differently is an imposter
3. Ethics
 - a. The false teachers claimed that they were without sin
 - i. We aren't sure if this worked out in a haughty self-righteousness that they were better than others
 - ii. Or a licentiousness because they believed they could not sin since they had a better knowledge and because they had this better knowledge they were abiding in God who didn't sin
 - iii. Maybe both happened, but in any case, it is clear that the false teachers did not have a high regard for the commands of Christ
 - b. So, against this, John points out that those who abide in Christ ought to look like Christ
 - i. It is impossible to abide in Christ and to know Christ and to live in opposition to His commands
 - ii. If we are in Christ, we will look like Christ - very simple logic but a very powerful teaching
 - c. Since those in Christ will look like Christ, we can know that anyone who is willfully ignoring the commands of Christ is an imposter
4. Fellowship
 - a. The false teachers claimed that they had a unique and perhaps exclusive fellowship with God
 - i. They had a special dispensation of the Spirit and were abiding in Christ by their special knowledge
 - ii. So, they could look down on others and create dissension in the church
 - b. Against this, John points out that those who abide in Christ will love those who abide in Christ
 - i. If we are in Christ, we can't hate others who are in Christ, instead we will care for them as part of our body, we will love them as we love Christ - this is a tangible measure of our love for Christ
 - c. Since those abiding in Christ will love Christ's people, we can know that anyone who does not practically love Christ's people is an imposter

D. Order of the book

1. All of the themes we have discussed above are used by John to develop a series of test to distinguish truth from error, light from darkness, the true teacher from the false professor
 - a. Historically, commentators have identified three sets of tests that are repeated several times in the book
 - b. These tests are the theological test (who is Christ?), the moral test (do they obey Christ's commands?) and the social test (do they love Christ's people?), and this is a good start to understanding the book
 - c. But, the number of tests isn't extremely clear, because while John is repetitive, none of his repeats are ever exactly the same, so we could count 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10 or some other number of tests, but the tests are important no matter how many tests we boil them down to
2. John's letter is focused on two things - warnings and tests, warnings against the spirit of the antichrist and tests to assure those who are truly in Christ
 - a. Introduction (1:1-4)
 - b. Body of tests and warnings (1:5-5:12)
 - i. Tests part 1
 - ii. Warning part 1
 - iii. Tests part 2
 - iv. Warning part 2
 - v. Tests part 3
 - c. Conclusion (5:13-21)

III. How does I John relate to the rest of the Bible?

A. I John and the Gospel: Relationship to the Gospel of John

1. I John is rooted strongly in the gospel message as we've already discussed above
 - a. For John, the incarnation of Christ, the God/man is central to his message
 - b. And our union with Christ is based on what Christ has done in His propitiation and intercession for us
2. This is seen especially in the relationship to John's gospel, for anyone who reads both the similarity is striking
 - a. There are differences in themes between the gospel and the epistle, but this is to be expected
 - b. The surprising thing is the amazing similarities between the books - the focus on love, obedience, incarnation, the Holy Spirit as teacher, light and darkness, life and death, truth etc. etc.
 - c. So I John is not only rooted in the gospel generally, it is rooted specifically in John's witness to Christ - and John starts his letter saying, "that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you."
3. So John's call for us to remember what we've heard from the beginning is to remember the basics of the gospel
 - a. John's letter is a pointer back to the gospel, a call to live according to the gospel
4. In fact, the relationship between the gospel of John and the epistle of John is so close that some have described I John as John's commentary on his own gospel
 - a. Perhaps misuse of his gospel encouraged John to make clear the purpose of his witness to Christ
 - b. So, John explains clearly the applications of much of his gospel, especially Christ's words in John 13-17

B. I John and the Old Testament

1. I John has the least direct references to the Old Testament of any book in the New Testament, but this doesn't mean that it is disconnected from the Old Testament, in fact the Old Testament bears strongly on I John
2. There is one direct reference when John references Cain in 3:12 as a negative example of the command to love
 - a. This one reference starts to help us understand John's commandment, love one another, because the one reference he makes is from the Old Testament - Love one another is rooted in the Old Testament which is quoted by Christ when He upholds this continuing command to love our neighbor
3. This then helps us understand John's curious statement in chapter 2
 - a. *"Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning, the old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in Him and in you because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining."*
 - b. The commandment John is referring to is love one another, but how is it an old commandment and how is it a new commandment?
 - c. It is an old commandment because it has been God's command since the Old Testament, but it is a new commandment because it has been renewed and re-revealed and perfected in Christ, the true light that is already shining - in other words, it is a New Covenantal view of the command to love one another
4. Which brings us to our strongest link between I John and the Old Testament, the New Covenant promise
 - a. Another curious statement John makes in I John 2 is, *"I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth... I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you. But the anointing that you received from him abides in you, and you have no need that anyone should teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about everything, and is true, and is no lie---just as it has taught you, abide in him."*
 - b. John isn't calling us to never have teachers, but to realize we don't need teachers who teach us new things because we have everything we need in Christ, we know all that is necessary in the gospel
 - c. This is the promise of the New Covenant, *"And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest"*
5. In fact, I John parallels all of the New Covenant promises, John is telling us that if the New Covenant is true, it ought to be lived out in our lives, we ought to see the truth of it worked out in us
 - a. The New Covenant promises that we will obey God from the heart, so John says we can't keep on sinning
 - b. The New Covenant promises that we will know God, so John says we don't need gnostic teachers
 - c. The New Covenant promises that God will be with us, so John tells us how we know that God abides in us
 - d. The New Covenant promises that God will forgive our sins and remember our iniquity no more, so John tells us that God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness
 - e. Christ is the seal of a New Covenant, so the promises of the New Covenant must be true in us

IV. Five Desires for Our Study Together

- A. As I close my introduction to I John, I've tried not only to meditate on what is in I John but also what I wanted us as a church to gain from studying I John**
1. So, I'd like to finish with a list of five desires from I John
 2. These desires have and will guide my prayers as I study through I John
 3. These desires will guide my preparation as I work to preach I John
 4. And I hope these desires will guide your listening and your meditation as we study the book together
- B. I want you to understand and appreciate the person and work of Christ more**
1. John's letter is rooted in who Christ is and John is constantly pointing us to Christ's incarnation, Christ's propitiation, and Christ's intercession as the basis for everything that he is writing to us
 2. So, as we study this letter, my first desire is that we would absorb John's teaching well and that our study would not just affect our minds, but that our hearts would rejoice in all that Christ is
- C. As you know Christ more, I want you to have a greater desire to be in Christ and to live as though you are in Christ**
1. As John upholds the glories of Christ, he calls us to abide in Christ to have a living union with Him
 2. And that living union with Christ will be expressed in our lives so that we cannot keep on sinning
 3. So, my desire for our study together is to strengthen our understanding of our union with Christ so that we can joyfully run after John's plea, *"My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin."*
- D. As you abide in Christ, I want you to have confidence in Christ before God that works itself out in earnest prayer**
1. As John writes to believers, he is not only warning them about the dangers of the false teachers but trying to encourage them in their faith, to have confidence before God because they are in Christ
 2. And John says this confidence will work itself out in earnest prayer, prayer that believes we are truly heard by God in Christ because of all that Christ has done on our behalf
 3. So, as we study together, my desire is that our confidence in Christ before God would grow and that it would be evidenced in earnest prayer, both personally and corporately, so that John's promise would be true, *"For this is the confidence that we have toward Him, that if we ask anything according to His will, He hears us, and if we know that He hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the request we have asked of Him."*
- E. As you spend your life in earnest prayer, I want you to have a renewed ability to distinguish truth from error**
1. As I've mentioned, John's letter is a series of tests that help us to distinguish those who are in union with God in Christ and those who are merely pretenders
 2. Although the exact challenges that our church faces today perhaps are not exactly the same as John's church, John's tests that help us distinguish truth from error are timeless and applicable to all Christians everywhere
 3. So, my desire for our study together is that through John's teaching and the Spirit's guidance, we would be renewed in our ability to distinguish truth from error and to identify those things that are in error around us
- F. I want you to have the same passion that John did and devote yourself to loving one another in genuine caring fellowship within our local church**
1. As I finish my introduction, I want to quote from Jackman's introduction to his commentary on I John - "Jerome tells us that when the aged apostle John became so weak that he could no longer preach, he used to be carried into the congregation at Ephesus and content himself with a word of exhortation. 'Little children,' he would always say, 'love one another.' And when his hearers grew tired of this message and asked him why he so frequently repeated it, he responded, 'Because it is the Lord's command, and if this is all you do, it is enough.'
 2. Everyone who has read John's gospel or John's epistles knows that our loving fellowship with one another in the church is the highest expression of our union with Christ and our unity in Christ
 3. So, my last and final desire for our study together is that we would have a renewed understanding and passion for loving one another in our church
 4. John 13:35 - *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*