

THE BOOK OF I JOHN

Introduction to I John

“That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested and we have seen it, and bear witness, and show unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that you also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.” I John 1:1-4

When one casually reads the Book of I John for the first time, one is impressed with its simplicity. However, upon further reading one comes to appreciate its depth, and receives a greater benefit from it. It is a letter written from a pastor to his flock, addressing a first century situation in the early church or churches.

The message of I John has significant application for the church and the world today when understood in its first-century context, but any attempt to read and interpret it apart from its setting will not only cause you to miss the truth of the message, but also lead to the introduction of false teachings and heresies. Its message will enable believers to experience growth in their faith, increasing joy, and assurance of salvation, while at the same time giving a true and severe warning to the unbeliever.

Authorship of I John

The traditional understanding is that the author of I John is the Apostle John, the author of the Gospel known by his name. There is both internal and external evidence to support this view. By external evidence we mean information found in sources outside of the book. By internal evidence we mean information found within the text or book itself.

The external evidence to support John's authorship is found in numerous references in the writings of the early church fathers, as well as several Christian books of the second and third centuries.

The internal evidence also supports John's authorship. It does so in two primary ways. First, the internal evidence points toward John as the author in that the author claims to be an eyewitness to the life of Jesus.

He does this in the opening four verses of the book where he describes just how closely and personal he was with Christ. Also, throughout the book, he writes as one having authority such as that of an apostle. This tone of authority is seen in the expression of “my little or dear children.” It is also seen in the commands which are to regulate the lives of his readers. His eyewitness testimony and his authority lead to the conclusion that the author of I John was an apostle.

The second way in which the internal evidence points to John as the author is seen in the similarity of its use of words, expressions, and ideas with those found in the Gospel of John. The author of each book uses the same set of contrasting phrases: “truth and falsehood (lie),” “light and darkness,” “love and hate,” “life and death.” The expression, **“only begotten Son”** occurs in John 3:16 and I John 4:9. Many such similarities exist in the two books that point to a common authorship.

A brief description of John can be given in this manner. His father was Zebedee. His mother was Salome. His brother was James. His nickname was “Son of Thunder.” His closest ministry partners were James, his brother, and Simon Peter. His Biblical writings are the Gospel of John, I, II, III John and Revelation.

So while John does not identify himself by name, the combination of these elements point to John, the son of Zebedee, who preferred merely to be known as **“the disciple whom Jesus loved.”** (John 21:20). John never got over the love that Jesus displayed toward him.

Date and Origin of The Writing of I John

The precise date of the writing is not available to us. It is generally believed to have been written shortly after the Gospel of John, which is believed to have been written in about 85 A.D. I John is quoted by Papias of Hierapolis, whose writings we may place at about 95-110 A.D. Polycarp, another of the early church fathers, gives knowledge of I John in his letter to the Philippians, written in the early second century.

Both Papias and Polycarp of Smyrna were residents of Western Asia Minor, not far from the major cultural center of Ephesus. This may be the reason they knew of John’s letter because late in his life, John was a spiritual leader in that part of the Mediterranean world. It is most likely that John is addressing problems that have arisen in the churches over which he, as an apostle, had some jurisdiction. These churches may well include those congregations to whom he addressed part of the book of Revelation, namely; Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia and Laodicea (Revelation 2, 3).

The letter seems to be combating a form of false teaching that became known as Gnosticism. This movement had its origins in the late first century. This helps place John's letter in the same time period. Also, John refers to his readers as belonging to a younger generation than he, making him advanced up in years. The best date for the letter would then be around 90-95 A.D.

Background and Purpose

Since John, in his letter, is so consumed with the false teachings from which he was attempting to protect his flock, it is most important that we try to gain an understanding of what the false teaching consisted. A crisis had arisen in the community of believers or churches due to the rise of teachers who were promoting a view of Christianity which was different from that held by John and the other apostles. The point had been reached where they could no longer abide in apostolic doctrine and had separated themselves from the church. They had set up a rival church claiming to represent an improved and advanced form of Christianity. In I John 2:19, we read, "**They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us.**" But, while they had left the church, they were still in contact with its members and were causing confusion and doubts among them regarding the true nature of Christian belief and practice, and raising questions whether the church members were truly Christians. John considered it necessary to write a careful statement of apostolic Christianity so that his flock might be able to see where the apostates were distorting the message, while at the same time reassuring them that they were the true people of God. Thus his main purpose in the letter is stated in I John 5:13: "**These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may believe on the name of the Son of God.**"

It is interesting that while I John deals with assurance of salvation, John's first book is for the purpose of evangelism and converting the unbeliever. In John 20:30, 31, we read, "**And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of His disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing you might have life through His name.**"

While we cannot be sure what the false teachers positively believed, we can be assured what features they denied of the apostolic faith.

1. They claimed to have fellowship with God and to be sinless (1:6, 8, 10).
2. They said they knew God (2:4).
3. They believed God was light and lived in that light (2:9).
4. They held unorthodox views about Jesus:
 - a. They did not believe that Jesus was the Christ or the Son of God (2:22; 5:1).

- b. They denied that Jesus had come in the flesh (4:2,3, cf. II John 7).
- c. They denied that His death had any atoning significance. If they claimed they had no sin, they would thus not stand in need of atonement and cleansing by His blood (2:1,2).
- d. They did not submit to any validity of Christ's commands (2:4).
- 5. They were unloving toward apostolic believers (2:9-11).
- 6. They were unholy and worldly in their lifestyles (2:15-17).
- 7. They claimed to possess a deeper knowledge of God than ordinary Christians (2:20, 27). This knowledge was based on special prophetic revelations that they claimed to receive directly from God (4:1).

It is quite evident to us today that these lifestyles were a departure from apostolic teaching. These false teachers, nevertheless, wanted to be known as Christians. They wanted to restate or redefine the gospel to fit into the prevailing climate of opinion that was popular in that day. That opinion comprised the beginning of a system that later in the second century systematic form became known as Gnosticism.

Gnosticism was one of the most dangerous and destructive heresies confronting the church in the first two centuries. It was a combination of oriental mysticism and Greek philosophy. It blended in just enough of the Christian message to make an effective counterfeit Christianity.

Although the many Gnostic groups had variations in their systems, Gnosticism had two basic beliefs. First, all matter or physical material is inherently evil, and the spirit is good. It was unthinkable that there could be any direct relation between the supreme God, who was pure spirit and essentially good, and the material universe which by definition essentially evil. It was believed that many aions or spirits emanated from God, and at some point one of these inferior powers known as a "demiurge" became evil and created the material universe. This was the God of the Old Testament in Genesis One. While Jesus was included in their system, the Biblical doctrine of His incarnation, atonement, and the resurrection had to be either rejected or redefined to fit the Gnostic system. The ultimate redemption for a Gnostic believer was to be separated from his physical body to live in the sinless and good realm of his eternal spirit.

This belief led Gnostics into numerous theological and ethical errors that clashed with apostolic Christianity. Their most significant theological error was the denial of the actual incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. Since the human body was evil, they believed the perfect God could not be united with it. Hence, Jesus could not be the perfect God.

In desiring to retain Jesus in their message, the Gnostics developed two different forms of teachings about Jesus while denying His incarnation.

The first was Docetic Gnosticism. Docetic means “to seem.” In this view the supreme God sent His Christ, an angel-like spirit, into the world to liberate those who were desiring to escape its evil influence. This Christ appeared in the person of Jesus but the body of Jesus was only an illusion. He was never actually human -- He only seemed to be human.

The second form was Cerinthian Gnosticism, named after its teacher, Cerinthus. This form made a distinction between the divine Christ, which was spirit, and the human Jesus. Cerinthus claimed that Jesus was a mere sinful man, who had the Spirit of Christ come upon Him at His baptism and leave Him just before His suffering and death on the cross. In this way the divine Christ was not born, nor did He die. He merely came upon Jesus for a season.

Both forms of Gnosticism can be seen in I John as John reaffirms the reality of the incarnation (4:1-3) and the unity of Jesus as the Christ from the beginning to the end of His earthly life (5:6).

The second basic belief in the Gnostic system was that salvation or redemption came through knowledge as opposed to faith. But this knowledge, which brought one into fellowship with God, was not an intellectual achievement, but consisted of a secret knowledge gained as a gift from a direct revelation of God. The word, “Gnostic” means “knowledge.” This special knowledge was considered different from and superior to the revelation found in the Scriptures. This belief led to a two-class division of Christians: the “haves” and the “have nots.” Those who have it were considered the spiritual ones, and those without it were looked upon as the carnal or fleshly ones. This distorted position led to a spirit of exclusivism, arrogance, and a lack of love toward the carnal Christians.

In the realm of ethics or morals, the Gnostics’ most significant error came about as a result of their belief that matter was evil. This led them into two opposite extremes. First, some treated their bodies harshly and with great discipline. This is seen in Colossians 2:21-23 where the error also existed. Second, some treated their bodies and moral behavior with great liberty and licentiousness. Since the body and the spirit were separate, it did not matter what people did with their bodies. They were above morality and nothing they did was considered sinful. This extreme teaching was the belief that John was confronting in I John when he insisted upon obedience to God’s commandments.

This new teaching thus combined a new theology with a new morality. In this situation it was impossible for those who taught and embraced the new views to continue to fellowship with those who believed the old teachings of John and the apostles. This led them to separate themselves into a new community or church and to part with their former brethren (2:19).

The Christians who remained in the “old paths” were shaken by their brethren who had left, or were leaving to join the “new school.” The ones who left were so sure they were right. They could talk in such lofty and confident terms of their special insights into the “true knowledge” that the humble believers might well question whether their beliefs were true or not. Who possessed the truth? Where and how was eternal life to be found – in the old ways they had been taught, or with the new revised form? Those who had left were saying, “We’ve got it, you haven’t!” Who could know what was right?

It was to these perplexed Christians that I John was written. John did not write the letter to condemn them or to raise doubts about their salvation or faithfulness. He wrote to restate in the clearest possible way the criteria upon which Christian truth and experience could be judged, and to help his readers see that they were the true Christians, and the seceders were the counterfeit ones. John is a man who knows what he is talking about. He knows what the true gospel is because he was there when it began. He had been a companion of the incarnate Word of Life! He had seen Him, heard Him and touched Him. His readers had not had this experience that he and his fellow apostles had experienced.

Where was eternal life to be found? In the Son of God. John states in 5:11, 12, ***“And this is the record, that God has given to us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He that has the Son has life; and he that has not the Son of God has not life.”*** But the Son of God had become incarnate. Those who denied His incarnation had not the Son and therefore could not have the eternal life that was to be found only in Him. It was as simple as that. They might claim to possess it, but their claim was in vain. They had abandoned the true foundation. John exhorts his readers with these words in 2:24-26: ***“Let that therefore abide in you, which you have heard from the beginning. If that which you have heard from the beginning shall remain in you, you also shall continue in the Son, and in the Father. And this is the promise that He has promised us, even eternal life. These things have I written unto you concerning them that seduce you.”*** In these words, John makes a strong affirmation of the permanent validity of the apostolic witness to Christ. For us today, that witness is enshrined in the New Testament writings that are our rule of faith and practice.

The Structure of I John

The structural content of the letter does not lend itself to a clear outline form. John is writing to reassure the believers they were the true possessors of eternal life. He is re-establishing the basics of the Christian faith, and in doing so he is providing several series of tests to identify the true faith from the false. He repeats and enlarges upon these tests as the letter expands. It might be viewed as spirals or circles expanding outward, covering the same truths only enlarging themselves each time they are repeated. This will be seen as the letter unfolds.

John provides three basic categories of tests by which a person can judge whether he or she truly possesses eternal life. The three tests cover the entirety of the human life. They are: (1) the theological, (2) the moral, and (3) the social areas of life. They test a person's beliefs (theological), behavior (moral), and love (social). The repetitions of these three tests provide the skeletal structure of I John.

This introduction should give an overview to help provide the reader of I John with an understanding why John was writing about certain issues and how his readers would have understood his teachings. He was refuting the errors found in the pre-Gnostic teachings which were infiltrating the churches, and he wanted to both clarify Christian doctrine and practice, as well as protect the flock.

The teachings found in the letter are clearly vital for the church and the world today. Despite all the differences between the first conditions existing in the first century and ours, there are fundamental similarities that make it possible to apply apostolic teachings to our present affairs. The church today needs to learn the lesson that faith must rest upon God's revelation of Himself in His Son, Jesus Christ. Also, that faith and love cannot be separated from one another, and that Christians are called to live a life of moral obedience and manifest love to others. In doing so, they can enjoy assurance that they are in the possession of the knowledge of God which is eternal life. **"This is life eternal, that they might know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent."** (John 17:3).