

1 John

Authorship: The author of this letter was John, a fisherman, and the “disciple Jesus loved.” Although none of the three short letters attributed to John actually bear his name, their similarity to his Gospel as well as the bulk of early church tradition that identifies him as the author, leaves little doubt as to who wrote them. John was probably living in or around Ephesus where he spent the last years of his life preaching and teaching. When he was very old, John was exiled to the Island of Patmos off the coast of Asia Minor. John is sometimes known as the apostle of love. His tender concern for other Christians is seen in his letters, where he often refers to his first readers as “my dear Children” or “my dear friends.” But he and his brother James were also called the “Sons of Thunder” by Jesus.

Date: Because we know with some certainty when John died, we can fix a date of around AD 89-90 for this letter.

Theme: Christians can be assured of their salvation in Christ and enjoy fellowship with God and one another as a result.

Unique Features: There is no formal greeting or conclusion. The use of “we” in the first paragraph may point to more than one writer (such as a school of John), or the author maybe saying “we” in a pastoral sense, as a way of including himself in what he is saying. His attachment to his first readers becomes obvious quite early in the letter, “my dear children” (1 John 2:1).

Background & Historical Situation: John writes to define the nature of the person of Christ in the face of heretical teachings which were afflicting the church near the end of the first century. The general name given to this teaching was Gnosticism, a religious-philosophic school which was basically characterized by the idea that only spirit was good and matter was evil. As in other Greek and Oriental religious systems, the Gnostics believed that one must free himself from the material world and be occupied alone with spirit. The way of escape, for the Gnostics, was the way of superior knowledge. By learning the mysterious secrets of the universe, the initiate of the cult could supposedly attain freedom. With regard to the teachings of Christianity, the opposition of this heresy centered in the person of Christ. Obviously, if matter (which involved the human body) was evil, God could not be “manifest in the flesh,” else He would be defiled. Therefore, Christ’s humanity was not real; the disciples only saw a phantom; He only seemed real. If, as others taught, Jesus was truly man, the “Christ-Spirit” did not actually unite with Him, except for the brief time between the baptism and the crucifixion. This was, therefore, a denial of His deity.

Purpose: John’s readers were facing a particular type of false teaching known as Gnosticism which undercut the essential Christian doctrine and behavior. (It was preoccupied with a secret knowledge which is evident by how many times John uses the word “know” in this letter” John wrote to strengthen their faith and fellowship by warning them about false teachers and the worldly activities that they promoted.

Key Passages:

- I. “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all (1 John 1:5).
- II. Dear friends, let us love one another” (1 John 4:7)
- III. “I write these things to you... that you may know that you have eternal life” (1 John 5:13).

Outline:

- I. **The Incarnation Makes Fellowship Possible (1:1-4)**
 - A. John Expresses the Substance of His Proclamation (1:1-2)
 - B. John Expresses His Purposes for Writing (1:3-4)
- II. **Fellowship with God Is Based on Truth and Love (1:5-5:17)**
 - A. The Apostolic Message Declares the Partners in Fellowship (1:5-2:2)
 - B. Fellowship Bears Certain Distinctive (2:3-27)
 - C. Fellowship Demands Certain Prerequisites (2:28-4:6)
 - D. Love Leads to Fellowship (4:7-5:5)
 - E. Faith Enhances Fellowship (5:6-17)
- III. **Fellowship Comprises Three Certainties (5:18-21)**

Sources:

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