

GOSPEL of *Grace*
FELLOWSHIP

1 John

Jesus Christ, Our Life

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F - L - I - G - H - T

F – Though 1 John doesn't mention its author, it has long been thought that the apostle wrote this letter. All five compositions attributed to John (his Gospel, three letters, & Revelation) have similar language, phrases, & themes. In fact, John has been nicknamed the Apostle of Love due to the frequent use of the word love in his works. John was the last of the 12 apostles to die, sometime between AD 98 & 100.

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F – John probably wrote this letter toward the end of his life after a long & fruitful ministry, possibly between AD 90 & 93.

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John “the Elder”?

Some maintain that the letter was written by another John, called John “the Elder.” They say that he was not an apostle but may have been a follower of the apostle. They point out that according to Irenaeus (AD 120-200), Papias (AD 60-140) in his writings named another John, who was not an apostle. They say that the letter was written later than John the apostle's time.

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John “the Elder”?

In response to this claim:

- John was the youngest apostle & lived to near the end of the first century.
- Apostles were elders (or bishops) by office (Acts 1:20; 1 Tim. 3:1) & apostles by gift (1 Cor. 12:4,28; Eph. 4:11).

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John “the Elder”?

- Peter also called himself an elder (1 Peter 5:1).
- The existence of another NT author named John is doubtful, being based on a questionable statement by Papias.

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Internal Evidence

- There is very good evidence from the text that John the apostle was the writer.
- He was an eyewitness of Christ's life & teachings (1:1-3), which was one of the characteristics of an apostle (Acts 1:21-25; 1 Cor. 9:1).

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6

Internal Evidence

- He wrote with the same style (using, for example, "this is..." "by this..."), the same basic vocabulary (*Father, Son, Spirit, beginning, Word [logos], Paraclete, belief, life, eternal, love, remain/abide, keep, commandment, true, know, beget, witness, light, darkness, world, sin, & devil*), & the same doctrine as the author of the fourth Gospel.

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7

Internal Evidence

- He wrote in the same style as "John" who wrote the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1), which is known to be John the apostle.
- Who else could write at this time, with this authority, with the same style, the same doctrine, & have his book accepted without ever placing his name on it?

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8

Key Words in John 1

- *Light* is used **6** times
- *Love* is used **44** times
- *Life* is used **15** times
- *Know* is used **37** times
- *Fellowship* is used **4** times

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Key Words in John 1

Frequent use of the word "know" is especially significant. John wanted to contrast true knowledge with the false knowledge of the Gnostic heretics.

The word "Gnostic" comes from the Greek *gnosis* ("knowledge"). The Gnostics considered themselves to be repositories of special secret knowledge.

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10

External Evidence

The evidence from outside the Epistle of 1 John that the apostle John wrote it is more than substantial.

- It was called an epistle of "John" from the earliest times by persons who would be in the best position to know who wrote it.
- It was accepted by a disciple of John named Polycarp (AD 70-155), & it was accepted by the early fathers as a work of John.

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External Evidence

- Other early writings claim it as a work of John, including the *Shepherd of Hermas* (AD 115-140) & Irenaeus (AD 120-200).
- Later Fathers accepted it too, such as Clement of Alexandria (155-220), Tertullian (160-222), Cyril of Jerusalem (315-386), Eusebius (260-340), Jerome (342-420), & Augustine (354-430).

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12

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L – The beloved apostle John wrote this letter to encourage believers to continue in their life of faith in Jesus Christ in accordance with the gospel they had been taught. John also warned his readers about false teachers & the ways of the world & proclaimed the preeminence of love – both God’s love for us, & our dutiful response to love one another.

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F - L - I - G - H - T

L – John wrote to define & defend the nature of Jesus Christ against heretical teachings. Most notable among these teachings was Gnosticism – the teaching that anything physical or material is evil, that only the spiritual is good.

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F - L - I - G - H - T

L – This belief directly attacked the incarnation of Christ, because if matter is evil, then Jesus could not be a perfect physical man. But John powerfully set forth Jesus as both deity & humanity.

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F - L - I - G - H - T

- I** – Advance in Divine Light – Walk in Him (1-2)
- Attitude toward Divine Love – Dwell in Him (3-4)
- Affinity with Divine Love – Live in Him (5)

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16

F - L - I - G - H - T

G – On the one hand, who could argue against or make small the immeasurable, unending wonder of God’s grace – his unmerited favor shown to us on the cross? But on the other hand, we’re not called to live however we want & just let grace do its thing. We have a responsibility to respond to grace by living according to God’s truth & walking in the light.

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17

F-L-I-G-H-T

G – There’s no wiggle room there, according to John: *“This is the message which we have heard from him and declare to you, that God is light and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all sin”* (1:5-7).

F-L-I-G-H-T

G – Following Jesus is countercultural because it means totally rejecting the world’s way of thinking & living. Once you embrace the good news & receive the gift of grace & salvation in Christ, you then live it out in your thoughts, words, & deeds. As you learn God’s truth & put it into practice, you will be transformed; your life will become rooted in truth, joy, peace, & the assurance of everlasting life.

F-L-I-G-H-T

H – After spending 3 years of his life with Jesus, the apostle John became a leader in the early church (Acts 3-5). It’s believed that after Paul & Peter’s executions around AD 66-67, John pastored the church in Ephesus, located along the Ionian coast in present-day Turkey. After the Romans destroyed the Jewish temple in AD 70, John may have been the leading disciple who helped keep the Christian community together.

F-L-I-G-H-T

H – He also probably began to write his Gospel account of Jesus around this time. In his later years, around AD 90, John wrote 3 letters (1, 2, & 3 John) to encourage Christians to keep the faith. He was exiled for this faith to Patmos, a rocky island about 45 miles off the coast of modern-day Turkey, around AD 93. It was from Patmos that he wrote the book of Revelation.

F-L-I-G-H-T

T – **Following Jesus revolutionizes your relationships.** *“That which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us”* (1:3). John shared the gospel so that others might join him in fellowship. *Fellowship* is so much more than hanging out over coffee & doughnuts. It is connecting with other Christians & going through life together, spurring one another on in spiritual growth.

F-L-I-G-H-T

T – **Following Jesus revolutionizes your holiness.** *“These things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous”* (2:1). When we meditate on the truth & then act on it, sin’s grip on us will diminish while holiness grows. And when we do stumble, we can fall back on the grace of our great Advocate before the Father – Jesus Christ.

F - L - I - G - H - T

T – Following Jesus revolutionizes your joy.
“These things we write to you that your joy may be full” (1:4). Joy comes from receiving & embracing the message of the gospel – a sure sign that God’s presence in your life is real. Knowing the authentic Jesus produces authentic fellowship with God and other believers, & that in turn produces joy.

F - L - I - G - H - T

T – Following Jesus revolutionizes your discernment. *“The anointing which you have received from him...teaches you concerning all things, and is true and is not a lie” (2:27).* Hone your ability to discern good from evil & truth from lies by reading & learning the word. John called us to *“test the spirits” (4:1)* – in essence, to take something we’ve heard or been taught & check it against the truth of Scripture.

F - L - I - G - H - T

T – Following Jesus revolutionizes your security.
“These things I have written unto you...that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13). Over & over again in this letter, John wrote about what we as believers *know* – not what we think or feel, but what we’re sure of. Having faith in Jesus isn’t based on wishful thinking or flimsy hopes but on the strong, confident assurance that through him, we have eternal life.

Addressees

The recipients of the letter were a group of mostly Greek-speaking Jewish churches with Gentiles as well.

- They were John’s disciples (“little children” – 2:18).
- He knew them well (2:19).

Addressees

- They knew him well since they accepted his book without even his name on it.
- They were warned about idols (5:21), which was not a Jewish problem but was a part of Greek culture.
- They were being influenced by the heresy of Docetism, which denied the humanity of Christ (4:1-3).

Addressees

The readers were located in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), probably the same general area as the seven churches of Revelation (Rev. 1:11).

Literary Form

1 John has no introduction, author's greetings, or concluding salutations. Yet the statements, "I am writing" (2:1) & "These things I have written to you" (2:26), show that originally 1 John was not an oral sermon, but a written composition.

Literary Form

The affectionate "*my dear children*," by which the writer repeatedly addresses his audience, implies a limited circle of Christians with whom he is closely acquainted. According to early church tradition, John lived in Ephesus during his old age. Therefore, 1 John is probably a general letter written in sermonic style to Christians he came to know in Asia Minor in the region surrounding Ephesus.

Purpose for 1 John

There are at least 4 reasons for John's writing the book that can be seen in the text:

- He wanted to urge them to continue in their fellowship with God & other believers (1:3).
- He desired to warn them against denial of Christ's humanity, a heresy called Docetism (4:2-3).

Purpose for 1 John

- He wished to exhort them not to sin & to remind them of the provision for sin made by Christ (2:1; 5:21).
- He aimed to provide assurance of salvation for all believers (5:13-20).

Cerinthus of the Gnostics

According to early tradition, John hurriedly left a public bath in Ephesus when he heard that the Gnostic leader Cerinthus had entered:

Cerinthus of the Gnostics

"There are those who heard from him [Polycarp] that John, the Lord's disciple, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus inside, rushed out of the bath house without bathing, exclaiming, 'Let us flee, lest even the bath house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is inside'" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*).

Cerinthus of the Gnostics

Building on the notion that matter is inherently evil, Cerinthus distinguished between an immaterial, divine Christ-spirit & a human Jesus with a physical body, & said that the Christ-spirit came on the human Jesus right after Jesus' baptism & left just before the crucifixion.

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Cerinthus of the Gnostics

Gnostics conceived of a gnostic redeemer who would deliver us from the prison of the flesh by imparting special secret knowledge.

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Cerinthus of the Gnostics

Against this Cerinthian doctrine John stresses that it was the one person Jesus Christ who was crucified: *"This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only [baptism], but by the water and by the blood [which flowed from his pierced side]"* (5:6).

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38

Docetism

Working on the same presupposition that anything material & physical must necessarily be evil, other Gnostics tried to avoid the incarnation & bodily death of Jesus Christ by saying that he only *seemed* to be human (so-called Docetism from the Greek verb *dokein*, "to seem").

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Docetism

Docetism asked the question, How can a spirit-being, "Christ" or the "Son of God," good by definition, become flesh, which is evil by definition?

Although such a spirit-being might temporarily *assume* a body of flesh, it could never *become* flesh.

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Docetism

Therefore John emphasizes the reality of the incarnation: *"What we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we observed and our hands felt..."* (1:1).

Ironically from the modern standpoint, the first Christological heresy attacked the humanity of Jesus rather than his deity.

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Theme of 1 John

For early Christians, heresy in the church posed the problem of distinguishing orthodoxy from heterodoxy, faithful ministers of the word from false teachers. The letter of 1 John formulates **several criteria** for testing the Christian profession of teachers & of yourself.

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42

Criteria for Christian Profession

To accomplish the purpose of strengthening his audience by combating heresy with truth, John discusses 3 criteria determining genuine Christian profession:

- Righteous living
- Love for other believers
- Belief in Jesus as the incarnate Christ

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Criteria for Christian Profession

Just as the criterion of belief in Jesus as the incarnate Christ is directed against the **Christological errors** of Gnostics, so also is the criterion of righteous conduct directed against the **moral laxity** of Gnostics, & the criterion of love toward fellow Christians directed against the **haughty exclusivism** of Gnostics.

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Criteria for Christian Profession

The Gnostics prided themselves on their "Christian freedom" to do anything they pleased, including freedom to sin.

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Criteria for Christian Profession

- Criterion of **righteous conduct** (1:5-2:6)
- Criterion of **mutual Christian love** (2:7-17)
- Criterion of **incarnational Christology** (2:18-27)
- Criterion of **righteous conduct** (2:28-3:10a)
- Criterion of **mutual Christian love** (3:10b-24a)
- Criterion of **incarnational Christology** (3:24b-4:6)
- Criterion of **righteous conduct** (4:7-5:3)
- Criterion of **mutual Christian love** (5:4-21)

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46

"Three Who Bear Witness"

1 John 5:7 in the KJV reads: "***There are three who bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one.***"

However, modern translations omit this verse. Why?

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“Three Who Bear Witness”

This verse has no support among the early Greek manuscripts. It is found in Latin manuscripts. Its appearance in late Greek manuscripts is based on the fact that Erasmus was placed under ecclesiastical pressure by the Roman Catholic Church to include it in his Greek NT of 1522, having omitted it in his two earlier editions of 1516 & 1519 because he could not find any Greek manuscripts that contained it.

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“Three Who Bear Witness”

Probably its inclusion in the Latin Bible results from a scribe incorporating a marginal comment (gloss) into the text as he copied the manuscript of 1 John.

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“Three Who Bear Witness”

But including it in the text violates almost every rule of textual criticism. Even the New King James Version, which generally retains the longer readings & disputed passages, comments in the margin that this is “a passage found in only four or five very late Greek mss.”

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50

Christians Without Sin?

Doesn't John contradict himself when he asserts that Christians are without sin? John affirms in 3:9: “*Whoever has been born of God does not sin.*” But in the first chapter he insisted: “*If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us*” (1:8).

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Christians Without Sin?

Nowhere does John claim that believers are without sin or never commit a sin. First John 3:9 is in the present continuous tense & should be translated: “*Whoever is born of God does not continually practice sin.*” Conversely, if a person habitually practices sin, he is not born of God.

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Christians Without Sin?

As James argued, true faith will produce good works (James 2:14-18). If a pig & a lamb fall into the mud, the pig wants to stay there, but the lamb wants to get out. Both a believer & an unbeliever can *fall* into the same sin, but a believer cannot stay in it & feel comfortable.

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53

Christians Without Sin?

It must also be pointed out that to say one “cannot sin” can be understood in various ways:

- One cannot sin mortally (lose life): **possible** – 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 John 5:16.
- One cannot sin absolutely (lose salvation): **impossible** – John 10:28-29; Rom. 8:36-37; Phil. 1:6; 2 Tim. 2:13.

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Christians Without Sin?

- One cannot sin deliberately (Heb. 10:26): **improbable** – most (if not all) sin is willful (2 Peter 3:5), & Christians sin (1 John 1:8).
- One cannot sin habitually – (present, progressive): **probable**, since it is in the present tense, meaning continually.

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55

Sin Leading to Death?

What is the “*sin leading to death*” referred to in 1 John 5:16? Is it forgivable?

On the one hand, the Scriptures speak of God’s free & unconditional forgiveness to all who want it (Acts 3:38-39; Rom. 5:20-21). On the other hand, Jesus spoke of an unpardonable sin that can never be forgiven (Matt. 12:32). And John declares here that there is a “*sin leading to death*.”

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56

Sin Leading to Death?

Bible commentators differ on just what John had in mind here. Some say he was referring to **repeated** sin (as in 3:9). Others believe he was speaking of a **grave** sin. Still others believe he had **apostasy** in mind (see 2 Peter 2).

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Sin Leading to Death?

Whatever John envisioned, there is no reason that it could not refer to a sin so serious that it would eventuate in **physical death**. Paul mentioned that the Corinthians had so participated in the Lord’s Supper in an unworthy manner that some were sick & others were dead as a result (1 Cor. 11:29-30).

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Sin Leading to Death?

The priests Nadab & Abihu were killed for their disobedience to the Lord (Num. 3:4), as were Ananias & Sapphira for their sin (Acts 5:1-10). So it is entirely possible that John has some such serious sin in mind here whereby the believer is turned over to Satan for “*the destruction of the flesh, that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus*” (1 Cor. 5:5).

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59

Sin Leading to Death?

Further, there are various ways “*sin leading to death*” can be understood:

- **Spiritual death** (Eph. 2:1): **not possible** – spiritual death is an unregenerate state into which we are all born (John 3:3-7), not one we acquire by sin once we are regenerated.

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60

Sin Leading to Death?

- **Moral death** (dead conscience – 1 Tim. 2:4): **possible** but not probable in this context because it speaks of a particular sin, not a gradual process leading to a deadening of our moral nerves.
- **Physical death**: **probable** since, elsewhere in the Bible, physical death results from serious sin (Acts 5:1-10; 1 Cor. 11:30).

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Comparison of John’s Epistles

Jesus said, “*I am the way, the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6).

- 1 John – Christ is the *life*.
- 2 John – Christ is the *truth*.
- 3 John – Christ is the *way*.

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62