

## “An Introduction to 1 John”

- INTRO. - Edmond Hiebert writes, “The forceful simplicity of its sentences, the note of finality behind its utterances, the marvelous blending of gentle love and deep-cutting sternness of its contents, and the majesty of ungarnished thoughts have made 1 John a favorite with Christians everywhere.”

- He says, “The plainness of its language makes it intelligible to the simplest saint, while the profundity of its truths challenges the most accomplished scholar. Its grand theological revelations and its unwavering ethical demands have left their enduring impact upon the thought and life of the Christian Church. First John is indeed a singular, irreplaceable gem among the books of the New Testament.”

- There are 27 books in the New Testament, and each one of them is uniquely special in its own way. The miraculous wonder of the doctrine of inspiration, is how the singular Spirit of God takes a multitude of authors, and through them accomplished His revelatory masterpiece.

- In the case of 1 John, the divine Spirit takes a unique man in a unique situation and communicates an ageless message. By the time we get to the end of the first century we see third-generation Christians facing perilous times.

- The Greco-Roman world was a hodgepodge of philosophical and ethical movements. MacArthur says,

“Religious syncretism and inclusivism were the watchwords of the day...” And much like the syncretism of our own day and time, this was *not* just an attitude of tolerance. It was an amalgamation that resulted in all kinds of cults and mystic religions – especially the proliferation of the Gnostic sects.

- Any good communicator of God’s truth must apply it to the cultural and philosophical currents of the day in which it is communicated. That’s exactly what we find, here in this little book called 1 John.

- Asia Minor (or what is now modern Turkey) was what America is in our day and time. It had become the “melting pot” of the world. Because it forms a “land bridge” between Europe and Asia, it felt the brunt of colliding ideas.

- There were constant invasions and migrations from other lands. (Sound familiar?) The Imperial cult of emperor worship had become widespread, so there were the loyalists to Rome.

- In addition to that, there were a large number of false gods, such as Zeus, Apollo, Asclepius, Dionysus, Cybele, and Artemis (whose magnificent temple was located in Ephesus and was one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World).

- In such an environment, the church of Jesus Christ is constantly challenged. We know that God does *not* take us out of the world when we become believers in Christ.

- He leaves us in the world (although we are *not* to be *like* the world) – and yet it is extremely difficult *not* to be influenced *by* the world. It is so easy for the church to become just like the world – and (unfortunately) in *our* day and time, there are those who even have this as a goal.

- *Some* think the only way to reach the world with the gospel is to be just like the world. As biblically foolish and spiritually insane as this idea is, there are countless thousands of modern-day Christians who have fallen into that trap.

- Jesus had warned that there would be false prophets who would lead believers astray. He said (in Matt. 7:15), “Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.”

- Paul had warned that there would be “savage wolves” that would come in among the sheep and devour them (Acts 20:29). Of the seven churches addressed in Rev. 2-3, only two of the seven remained pure doctrinally.

- And it was right here – where these seven churches existed – that the last of the apostles battled for the purity of the faith. MacArthur says, “Though he was by now an old man (most likely at least in his eighties), age had not dampened John’s fiery zeal for the truth.”

- And this is a very relevant book! Translating this into our own time, MacArthur writes, “In our inclusive age of secularism, postmodernism, relativism, New Age cults,

and militant world religions, the apostles’ words of warning and assurance are both timely and relevant. As always, the church ignores [the warnings] at her own peril.”

- Now, you know what to expect (as we begin the study of a new book). We’re *not* even going to get into the text today, but we are going to lay the foundation of this study. There are some critical things we need to know about this book before we launch into a study of its truths.

- These are basic elements we need to know about any NT book, but especially *this* one (that has such a unique purpose and context). You might see these as the tools we need to rightly interpret (and apply) this book of the Bible.

- *Some* might see these as boring details that only Bible scholars care about – but if we fail to understand these things, we will likely miss the entire thrust of the message contained in this book. So we’re going to take the time to go through these – and we begin with:

## I. THE ORIGINATOR

- From the divine side the originator of these words are the very Spirit of God – but from the human side we need to ask about the one through whom the HS inspired these truths.

- We could just say that the Apostle John wrote this (and move on), but sometimes it helps to understand the issues connected to the authorship of NT books. We're *not* told (in 1 John) that the Apostle John wrote it. In fact, 1 John and Hebrews are the only two NT epistles that do *not* identify their human authors.

- However, this is typical of John's writings. Of the five writings of John, only the Revelation names John as its author. The humility of John drives him to focus on Christ and *not* on himself.

- From the first century all the way up to the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century the church consistently accepted the apostle John as the author of this letter. It was *not* until the rise of destructive higher criticism that this was ever doubted.

- The truth of the matter is, that the evidence for the apostle John as the author of this book has overwhelming internal and external verification.

- 1 John displays remarkable similarities to the Gospel of John. MacArthur says, "Both works present a series of stark contrasts, with no third alternative (e.g., light and darkness; life and death; love and hate; truth and lies; love of the Father and love of the world; children of God and children of the Devil; being in the world but *not* of the world; to know God or *not* to know God; to have eternal life or *not* to have eternal life)."

- There are also a number of grammatical similarities between the two. These two books have many words and

phrases in common (many of which are found nowhere else in Scripture). The same theological themes are developed in both – such as the only begotten Son of God and the truth that Jesus Christ is the only source of light and life.

- The author of 1 John claims to be an eyewitness to the events in Christ's life (in contrast to the second and third generation Christians he addresses). This considerably narrows down the possible authors.

- This would mean that the author had to have been one of the few remaining disciples who were intimately associated with Jesus, and who were still alive at the end of the first century (when this was written).

- In fact, the author of this book writes with an air of apostolic authority. John Stott writes, "There is nothing tentative or apologetic about what he writes. He does *not* hesitate to call certain classes of people liars, deceivers or antichrists. He supplies tests by which everybody can be sorted into one or other of two categories. According to their relation to his tests they either have God or have not, know God or do not, have been born of God or have not, have life or abide in death, walk in the darkness or in the light, are children of God or children of the devil."

- He says, "This dogmatic authority of the writer is seen particularly in his statements and in his commands." In other words, he clearly expects his listeners to heed his commands – and only an Apostle of Christ could write with this kind of authority.

- As far as the second type of verification, Hiebert says that “First John is better attested by external evidence than any of the other general epistles.” There are possible or definite allusions to 1 John in such late first and early second-century works as Clement of Rome’s *First and Second Epistles to the Corinthians*, the *Didache*, the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the *Shepherd of Hermas*, the *Epistle of Diognetus*, Justin Martyr’s *Apologies* and *Dialogue with Trypho*, Polycarp’s *Epistle to the Philippians*, and the writings of Polycarp’s contemporary, Papias.

- Eusebius of Caesarea, in his famous *Historia Ecclesiastica* placed 1 John among the *homologoumena* – the acknowledged books of the NT canon. He wrote, “...the writings of John, *not only* his gospel, but also the former of his epistles [1 John] has been accepted without dispute both now and in ancient times.” 1 John was also included in the second-century list of canonical books, known as the Muratorian Canon.

- The first church father who quoted directly from 1 John (and claimed the apostle John as its author) was Irenaeus – but this is significant because he was a direct disciple of Polycarp, who was a direct disciple of John himself.

- Irenaeus’ contemporaries (Clement of Alexandria and Tertullian) also attributed 1 John to the Apostle – as did Origen, Dionysius of Alexandria, and Cyprian (in the third century).

- This is overwhelming evidence, so who was this Apostle? He was the youngest of the two sons of Zebedee. He and his older brother James were dubbed by Jesus as “the sons of thunder.” His mother was Salome, who contributed to Jesus’ ministry and may have been the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus. If this was the case, then Jesus and John would have been cousins.

- He was originally a disciple of John the Baptist, but when Jesus was identified as the Messiah, he immediately left to follow Him. Along with Peter, he and James were part of the inner circle of disciples.

- John became known as the “apostle of love” and the one who leaned on Jesus’ breast at the last supper. When Jesus was being crucified he committed the care of his mother to John.

- After the resurrection, John became one of the leaders of the Jerusalem church. In the early chapters of Acts he is seen as sharing in the working of mighty miracles alongside Peter – but after chapter 8 he is *not* mentioned again.

- According to tradition John spent the last decades of this life in Ephesus, overseeing the churches of Asia Minor. Apparently he was there until he was banished to the Isle of Patmos and then returned after he was set free.

- It is likely that he wrote his gospel and three epistles during his first stay at Ephesus and compiled the

Revelation, either at Patmos or in his second residence at Ephesus. He eventually died there and was buried there.

- Despite his later reputation as the “apostle of love,” John was also a “son of thunder.” He had a fiery temperament – and you may remember he even wanted to call down fire on a Samaritan village who refused to receive Jesus.

- He and his brother once asked Jesus for a prominent place in the future kingdom – only to be promised a cup of suffering instead. This prophecy was fulfilled in James being martyred first and John living a long life of suffering for Christ’s sake.

- Although he mellowed over time, he never lost his passion for the truth. This was later borne out by an account from Polycarp, who wrote that “John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving [the heretic] Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of truth, is within.’”

- Now, I spent a lot of time on this first point (because we need to understand the author) but we need to move on (now) to a second element, which is:

## II. THE ORGANIZATION

- I’m *not* going to say a lot about this, but there are some who have questioned the structure of this “epistle.” This

letter does *not* have the typical elements of a letter. It does *not* have a salutation or a greeting at the conclusion. Some have said it reads more like a sermon or a tractate.

- McGee says, “It bears all the marks of a message from a devoted pastor who had a love and concern for a definite group of believers.” So in this way, it is similar to the Book of Hebrews.

- It also ends as abruptly as the Book of James. It contains no formal thanksgiving for the readers, as is characteristic of Paul’s letters. Hiebert writes, “It does *not* contain a single personal name beyond a passing reference to Cain (3:12), nor does it offer a single concrete statement – personal, historical, or geographic – concerning either the writer or readers. It is destitute of all that is merely local or specific.”

- It probably still should be classified as a “letter” (because the author deals with actual life situations being experienced by people he knows and loves), but because it is *not* local or specific, it is probably intended to be more of a *general* letter to all the churches in that region.

- However, I need to say something about the style (because it is very different from other epistles in the NT). Ogilvie writes, “Whereas Paul writes in the tradition of Greek rhetoric...John on the other hand writes more like the Psalmist or the writer of Proverbs. He repeats; he writes with the use of parallelism, and repetition of ideas.”

- He says, “We who are the children of Greek thought and method of argument are more acquainted with the intellectual style of Paul, but the poet and musician is more acquainted with the style of John. Like the poet or artist, John spends much time on one detail; repetition is welcomed and embraced.”

- I can't resist one last quote – he says, “It will do us no good to remind our writer that he has already made that point in chapter 2; he wants to tell it to us again in chapter 5, yet with a slightly different accent and emphasis. He knows exactly what he is doing, and if we watch closely and accept his way of expression, we will be deeply challenged intellectually and also poetically moved by the sheer buildup of intensity and overall design.”

- Ogilvie likens John's style to that of throwing rocks on a pond and watching them form rings that flow over one another. John throws out various themes (like rocks) and we see the waves reverberate throughout this book.

- Hiebert points out that “his method is not that of formal argument but of categorical affirmation. His writings may be characterized as intuitive rather than analytic and deductive. He speaks with a tone of authority; he sets forth his pronouncements and passes on without stopping to vindicate them.”

- Scroggie says, “He thinks in terms of ultimates. His colors are black and white – there is no gray.” In fact, no

other writer in the NT employs stronger words of denunciation of sin and error than John. Thirdly we see:

### III. THE ORIENTATION

- Let me just summarize this (for the sake of time): This letter was written by John from the city of Ephesus in the early 90s AD. The Gospel of John was written before this (in the 80s) and the Revelation was written in the late 90s.

- The recipients are primarily Gentiles in the area of Asia Minor. According to Eusebius, he was exiled to Patmos in 94 AD, but returned to Ephesus after the death of Emperor Domitian. He remained there until the time of his own death and was buried there at Ephesus.

- So it was clearly the believers at Ephesus (and the rest of Asia Minor) who were the recipients of this letter. They were converts from Gentile paganism and had to be warned repeatedly about the danger of idolatry. And this leads us (fourthly) to:

### IV. THE OCCASION

- What was the main reason for the writing of this letter? The basic reason for the writing of 1 John was the apostle's deep concern for the spiritual welfare of these congregations in Asia Minor.

- There is no explicit reference to any persecution in this letter, so words of consolation (like you find in 1 Peter)

are absent. Hiebert writes, “The recipients were indeed familiar with the hatred of the world (3:13), but apparently they were not at the time subjected to an officially prompted hatred against them; [instead] it was a hatred which arose out of the moral antagonism between the Church and the world.”

- The greatest danger for the churches of that day was *not* external persecution, but internal seduction. Their greatest danger was false teaching that had begun to infiltrate the church.

- Of course, the Apostle Paul had warned about this danger. In Acts 20:29-30 He said, “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.”

- Often the greatest danger for Christianity is *not* that it will be destroyed from some outside force, but that it will be changed through faulty teaching on the inside. And many times this comes from some who think they can *improve* it in some way. Some think they can make it more intellectually sophisticated or morally acceptable to more people. Some think we need to make Christianity more attractive in some way.

- The Greco-Roman world of that day was filled with all kinds of competing voices, so there were those in the church who began to think that we need to make the

gospel more appealing in order to compete with all these other philosophies.

- The false teachers of that day were highly influenced by the popular philosophies and trends that were going around. Their heretical teaching represented the beginning stages of what is now understood to be Gnosticism. By the second century this movement had grown into an enormous threat to the church.

- Gnosticism is from the Greek word *gnosis*, which means “knowledge.” MacArthur says it “was an amalgam of various pagan, Jewish, and quasi-Christian systems of thought.”

- It was highly influenced by Greek thought (especially that of Plato) and it essentially held that all matter is evil and spirit is good. This philosophical dualism led to a number of theological heresies, particularly that of rejecting the humanity and/or deity of Christ.

- For many of the Gnostics, Jesus could *not* have possibly had a human body because the body is evil. So this led to a basic denial of the doctrine of the incarnation.

- The denial of the incarnation took two forms. Some, known as the Docetists, taught that Jesus’ body was not a real, physical body, but only *appeared* to be a human body. The Greek word “dokeo” means “to seem.” So the idea was that Jesus just *seemed* to have a human body, but in actuality He did *not* (according to them).

- So John is going to make it absolutely clear in this epistle that he (as an eyewitness) had physically “touched” Jesus’ human body. He is going to verify that this teaching is false.

- Other false teachers (such as Cerinthus) taught that the Christ spirit descended on Jesus at his baptism, but left him before his crucifixion. Barclay explains that “Cerinthus drew a definite distinction between the human Jesus and the divine Christ. He said that Jesus was a man, born in a perfectly natural way. He lived in special obedience to God, and after his baptism the Christ (in the shape of a dove) descended upon him...”

- Cerinthus then claimed that “at the end of Jesus’ life, the Christ withdrew from him so that the Christ never suffered at all. It was the human Jesus who suffered, died and rose again.”

- Interestingly, this false teaching shows up in the apocryphal gospels, such as the *Gospel of Peter*. This false writing appeared about 130 AD, and claimed that Jesus showed no pain at all upon the cross. And because it was at this moment that the Christ spirit left His human body, what He really cried out from the cross was, “My power! My Power! Why have you forsaken me?”

- In the false writing called *The Acts of John*, there is a claim that while the human Jesus was being crucified on Calvary, John was actually talking to the divine Christ in a cave on the hillside, and the Christ said to him, “John, to the multitude down below I am being

crucified...but...listen to what I say...nothing...of the things they...say of me have I suffered.”

- So John will hit this false teaching head on in this epistle. He will show that the very same person who was baptized was also the one who was crucified. He will show that He was fully man and fully God all throughout His entire life on earth.

- Now, why are these false doctrines so dangerous? Because they *not only* undermine the biblical teaching of the *incarnation* – they also threaten the very doctrine of *atonement*. If Jesus was not really fully God and fully man, then He could *not* have been the perfect sacrifice for sin.

- In addition to this, the Gnostics’ theological dualism destroyed the moral and ethical standards of the gospel. Many of them believed that since the body is evil, that it doesn’t matter what one does physically. This led to all kinds of gross immorality. So John has to address this as well.

- The Gnostic belief that all matter is evil actually produced three different responses. There were the “ascetics” who turned to celibacy and fasting and rigid control of all human desires (including, for many of them, a deliberate ill-treatment of the body).

- The second response was that of indulging the appetites of the body to the fullest, believing that nothing done in

the body matters. This is the form that led to so much gross immorality.

- But there was also a third response – and this was the notion that the Gnostic regarded himself as altogether spiritual, having shed the bondage of physical matter. This led to the idea that they had reached perfection and no longer sinned.

- So John will clearly deal with this false teaching as well. He will say things like, “If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” (That’s 1 John 1:8.) He will say, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us.” (That’s verse 10.)

- And (by the way) don’t think for a moment that Gnosticism is just some ancient philosophy that is no longer a problem. It is still very much a problem in the church today. McGee says, “The same principle is in modern liberalism” today. We still have those who hold to the false teaching of perfectionism. None of this has really gone away.

- And then there was another problem with the threat posed by Gnosticism. It became a serious threat to Christian fellowship. The Gnostics viewed themselves as the “spiritual elite” and therefore looked down on those who were *not* among the elite.

- The Gnostics believed that they were in on some sort of secret knowledge that the masses of people had no clue

about. They scorned the unenlightened ones who did *not* have this special knowledge they (supposedly) had.

- This was destroying fellowship in the church, and so John would say things like, “The one who says he is in the light and yet hates his brother is in the darkness until now.” (That’s 1 John 2:9.) He will say, “If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from Him, that the one who loves God should love his brother also.” (That’s 1 John 4:20-21.)

- So with all this false teaching going on, the apostle John could *not* sit idly by and allow this to go unchecked. Like any loving pastor he was deeply concerned about the danger all this posed for the church. But the message of this book goes deeper than this, so lastly we need to talk about:

## V. THE OBJECTIVES

- John’s purpose for this letter is *not* merely polemical. He also has a deep pastoral concern for the spiritual growth and vitality of his people. *Not only* does he want to refute the false teaching, but he also wants to encourage and reassure the true believers.

- He is concerned about the edification of his “children” in the faith. So we see this expressed in several statements from this letter. In 1:4 he writes, “These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete.”

- In 2:1 he writes, “My little children, I am writing these things to you that you may not sin.” In 5:13 he declares, “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.”

- And as you may know, in this book John provides them with a series of “tests” that are intended to help them come to the assurance of their salvation. He wants to make sure that all of them come to the full confidence of their faith. We’re going to examine these tests carefully as we go through this book.

- He also wants them to be firmly grounded in sound doctrine. He wants them to have a firm grasp on the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

- He also wants them to be fully committed to loving one another. The word “agape” appears 51 times in this little book. This is also a prominent theme we will see over and over again. The double assertion that “God is light” and “God is love” adds to the biblical teaching concerning the nature of God.

- So we see that the purpose for 1 John is different from the Gospel of John. The Gospel of John was “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). 1 John was written to those “who believe on the name of the Son of God, so that [they might] know that [they] have eternal life (1 John 5:13).

- You and I live many, many years removed from the situation in Asia Minor in the first century. And yet, these are things that are just as relevant for us as they were for believers back then. We still have the same challenges, and we still have the same spiritual needs.

- So it’s with all these things in mind that we approach this book – and we’ll move into it next week...

- PRAYER