

## That You May Know ... An Introduction and Overview of 1 John

### 1 John: Introduction

- In 70 A.D., after several years of fighting, the armies of Rome completely conquered the Holy Land destroying the city of Jerusalem – and its temple – in the process.
- Shortly prior to that, the Christian population fled. Many went east across the Jordan.
- John the Apostle was part of a group that eventually went to the Roman province of Asia where he settled in Ephesus.
  
- Ephesus was a large commercial city with a deep heritage of paganism and a reputation for being a center of magic and the occult.
- The church in Ephesus had been founded in about A.D. 52 by the Apostle Paul.
- He served there for several years and had a wide-reaching ministry.
- For a time in the 60s, Paul’s helper Timothy acted as his representative over the church.
  
- John probably wrote his three New Testament letters and his Gospel while in Ephesus, somewhere between 85 and 95 A.D.
- A good guess for Revelation, also written during that period, is about A.D. 96.
- Certainly “the Elder” John must have had remarkable influence, being the only one of the original Twelve left alive by this time.
  
- Nonetheless, it appears that there was at least one group who separated from the aged apostle and his teaching.
- These were precursors of those who would later be called the Gnostics – a large and diverse heretical movement that would remain strong for the next several centuries.
- A group of these dissidents apparently split off from the main body of the Asian church.
  
- In response, John wrote this letter to the believers who were still part of his circle and remained faithful.
- The tone of the letter indicates that they had a personal connection with him.
- His goal was to establish them in their faith, encourage them to abide in it, and discourage them from buying into the erroneous beliefs of the dissidents.
  
- Matthew Henry (1662 – 1714) saw two distinct purposes behind 1 John:
  - “The design appears to be, to refute and guard against erroneous and unholy tenets, principles, and practices, especially such as would lower the Godhead of Christ, and the reality and power of his sufferings and death, as an atoning sacrifice ...
  - “This epistle also stirs up all who profess to know God, to have communion with him, and to believe in him, and that they walk in holiness, not in sin, showing that a mere outward profession is nothing, without the evidence of a holy life and conduct.”
  
- John himself stated several clear purposes in writing the letter:
  - The first is in 1:3.
    - John wanted to encourage fellowship,
    - First among believers
    - But also between believers and God.

- The second is in 1:4.
  - John wanted to fill them with joy.
  - This wonderful fruit of the Spirit is generally in short supply among heretical movements.
  - (If 2 Peter was one of the least pleasant of the NT letters to study, 1 John may be the most enjoyable.)
- A third is in 2:1.
  - Fellowship with Christ truly changes us.
  - Departure from sin is an integral part of a thriving relationship with the Lord.
  - Christ is our Advocate for those times when we do still fall short.
- A fourth is in 2:26.
  - John was concerned that some of his “little children” might be deceived.
  - The dissident movement may not have been biblically accurate, but it held wide popular appeal, being more in line with the prevailing Greco-Roman culture and its beliefs.
- A fifth is in 5:13.
  - Here he uses language that parallels a similar purpose statement that we find near the end of his Gospel:
  - For the statement in the Gospel, see John 20:31.
  - Then see 1 John 5:13, for the statement in this first letter.

### **1 John: Overview**

- 1 John does not read very much like a letter.
- For example, the author does not identify himself – nor his recipients.
- The letter is more of an encouraging talk.
- We get the title 1 John from the manuscripts and from other early Christian leaders.
- John only identifies himself as “John” in Revelation – not even in his Gospel.
  
- 1 John is deeply theological, but not at all systematic in its approach.
- John does not develop his themes the linear style we see in Paul’s letters, Hebrews or Peter.
- Rather, he gives us a series of recurring (but not quite repetitive) themes and contrasts.
- We can think of it as climbing a spiral staircase of Christian ideas – ideas that build or grow as the letter moves forward.
  
- Recurring contrasts are:
  - Light and Darkness
  - Truth and Falsehood
  - Love and Hate
  - Sin and Righteousness
  - Death and Life
  - Christ and Antichrist (By the way, John is the only biblical author to use the term “antichrist,” five times total, four of them in this letter.)

- Recurring themes are:
  - Knowledge – or “knowing” – probably a jab at the dissidents – who were moving toward Gnosticism.
  - The relationship between the Father and the Son
  - Propitiation – or “atoning sacrifice”
  - Keeping commandments
  - Life, Fellowship and Abiding
  - Sin and the World
  
- One last major theme is Assurance, and we can see it in all the following places:
  - 2:3-5 Obedience leads to assurance.
  - 2:28 Abiding in Him gives us confidence.
  - 3:18-21 Active love leads to assurance.
  - 4:13 The Holy Spirit gives us assurance.
  - 5:11-13 We may know that we have eternal life.
  - 5:14-15 Praying according to God’s revealed will gives us confidence and assurance in prayer.
  
- Robert Law made a beautiful observation:
  - “With St. John the grounds of assurance are ethical, not emotional; objective, not subjective; plain and tangible, not microscopic and elusive. They are three, or rather, they are a trinity: Belief, Righteousness, Love. By ... belief in Christ, ... keeping God’s commandments, and ... love to the brethren, a Christian ... is recognized and recognizes himself as begotten of God.”
  
- Let’s read the letter through, which will take something like 15 minutes.
- But, as we read, let’s put those assurance verses back on the screen.

### **1 John: Conclusions**

- Let’s remind ourselves again of the themes and contrasts that we will be looking at over the next several weeks.
- Recurring contrasts are:
  - Light and Darkness
  - Truth and Falsehood
  - Love and Hate
  - Sin and Righteousness
  - Death and Life
  - Christ and Antichrist
  
- Some recurring themes are:
  - Knowledge – or “knowing.” John wants us to be completely secure in our beliefs.
  - The relationship between the Father and the Son
  - Propitiation – or “atoning sacrifice”
  - Keeping commandments
  - Life, Fellowship and Abiding
  - Sin and the World

- Finally, let's reread John's statements of purpose behind the letter. These point to ways that we can expect to see ourselves grow as we study 1 John:
  - 1:3
  - 1:4
  - 2:1
  - 2:26
  
- And let's close by reading John's final purpose statement one last time.
  - This verse is a huge source of encouragement and assurance for all of us who believe in Jesus Christ.
  - Again, it's in 1 John 5:13.