

The Epistle of First John

Lesson One

Introduction:

I. Author:

A. Internal evidence:

1. Author does not identify himself but was an apostolic eyewitness to the life of Jesus Christ (1 Jn 1:3).
 - a. Must be one of the original disciples.
 - b. Author of fourth Gospel also unidentified but possibilities narrow to only one person – John, brother of James and son of Zebedee.
2. Other methods of identifying author.
 - a. Similar language, style of writing, and theme between 1 John and fourth Gospel.
 - b. Opening verse of 1 John echo first chapter of the Gospel of John.
 - c. and reveals that the author was an eyewitness to the events in the life of Jesus before the Lord's crucifixion, and an eyewitness of the events following the Lord's resurrection.

B. External evidence:

1. Early Christians recognized the apostle John as the author.
 - a. Muratorian Canon (middle second century) attributes the fourth Gospel, and 1 John to the apostle John (also 2 and 3 John).
 - b. Polycarp of Smyrna (69-155 AD), a disciple of John, attributes the apostle as the author of the fourth Gospel and these letters.
 - c. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202 AD), a student of Polycarp, also linked the Gospel of John and 1 John as written by the apostle.
 - d. We can also add other significant patristic witnesses, including Papias, a contemporary of John and Polycarp (60-130 AD), Origen (184-253 AD),

Cyprian (200-258 AD), Clement of Alexandria (150-215 AD), Tertullian (155-240 AD), and Eusebius (260-339).

II. Recipients are not named.

A. Most likely intended of churches in western Asia Minor.

1. John spent his final days in Ephesus.
 - a. It is reasonable to conclude the letters were written to individuals or local churches of which John would have been familiar.

III. Place of origin unknown.

A. During the early 90's AD persecution against Christians rose under Emperor Domitian (81-96 AD).

1. During this persecution, the apostle John was arrested and exiled to the small island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea from where he wrote the book of Revelation (Rev 1:9).
2. After that persecution ended, John returned from exile and continued to minister among the churches in Asia Minor until his death after the crowning of Emperor Trajan (c. 98 AD).

IV. The date.

A. John could have written his first epistle before, during, or after his exile on Patmos.

1. The consensus is the epistle was written around 90 AD – prior to his exile.
 - a. Note: In most cases the date ascribed to New Testament books and epistles is relatively inconsequential. The one major exception to this concerns the book of Revelation. The interpretation given to Revelation varies significantly based on whether one takes an early dater (prior to 70 AD) over the later date (96-98 AD).

V. Purpose and theme.

A. John presents a simple truths and principles.

1. He redefines lines that had begun to fade in the minds of many readers.
 - a. Some were compromising to a worldview much like the philosophy of Relativism in our day – where there are no clear lines between right and wrong, and where there are no absolute truths.

2. Love for God and for one another is a major theme of 1 John (e.g. 1 Jn 4:7).
3. His overall goal in writing this letter is stated in his opening remarks (1 Jn 1:3-4).

B. Eight key reasons for the letter:

1. Four positive:
 - a. "That your joy may be full" (1 Jn 1:4).
 - b. "That you may not sin" (1 Jn 2:1).
 - c. "That you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn 5:13).
 - d. "That you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God" (1 Jn 5:13).
2. Four negative:
 - a. Worldliness in the form of false philosophy and carnal deeds (1 Jn 2:15-17).
 - b. A compromising tendency toward sin and worldliness (1 Jn 1:5 – 2:6; 2:15-17).
 - c. A general lack of love for the brethren and an indifference toward their physical needs (1 Jn 2:7-11; 3:13-24).
 - d. A general lack of assurance of salvation (1 Jn 5:13).

C. Internal issues threatening the church through false teachers.

1. Preaching a gospel that was "antichrist" – against the character, nature, purpose, and teachings of Jesus (1 Jn 2:22, 26; 4:1).
 - a. Gnosticism – a mystical religious and philosophical mixing of Christianity with Jewish and eastern doctrines.
 - b. Gnosticism claims its adherents possess intuitive and mysterious knowledge of divine matters (Greek, *gnosis*).
2. The three major groups of Gnostics included:
 - a. The Ebionites, followers of Ebion, denied the deity of Christ, teaching that He was merely a creature.
 - b. The Docetists, denied the humanity of Christ, teaching that He was merely a visionary being, a phantom, void of human nature and had not come in the flesh.

- c. The Cerinthians, followers of Cerinthus, denied the union of the two natures of Christ (flesh and spirit) prior to His baptism.
3. Tragically, a major factor in their teaching was sensuality (Jude 16, 19; 2 Pet 2:2-3, 10, 13-15, 18-19; Rev 2:14-15).

Outline: (From Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary).

- I. Prologue: The Word of Life (1 Jn 1:1-4)
- II. God Is Light (1 Jn 1:5 – 3:10)
 - A. Walk in the Light (1:5 – 2:2)
 1. God is Light (1:5-7)
 2. Resist sin (1:8 – 2:2)
 - B. Obey the command to love (2:3-11)
 1. Know God and keep His commands (2:3-6)
 2. Learn the new command and love others (2:7-11)
 3. Know your spiritual status (2:12-14)
 4. Be warned of enemies of the faith (2:15-27)
 - a. Beware of the world (2:15-17)
 - b. Beware of the antichrists (2:18-27)
 5. Live like children of God (2:28 – 3:10)
 - a. Be confident and ready for His coming (2:28 – 3:3)
 - b. Be righteous and do not sin (3:4-10)
- III. God Is Love (1 Jn 3:11 – 5:12)
 - A. Love one another: part one (3:11-24)
 1. Love in action (3:11-18)
 2. Live in confidence (3:19-24)
 - B. Test the spirits (4:1-6)
 - C. Love one another: part two (4:7-21)
 1. Love others because God loves you (4:7-10)
 2. Love others because God lives in you (4:11-21)
 3. Obey God and experience the victory of faith (5:1-5)
 4. Believe in the Son and enjoy eternal life (5:6-12)

IV. Conclusion:

A. Confidence and Characteristics of the Child of God (1 Jn 5:13-21)

1. Know you have eternal life (5:13)
2. Be confident in prayer (5:14-17)
3. Do not continue in sin (5:18-20)
4. Keep yourself from idols (5:21)

Review Questions:

1. Who is author of the 1 John?
2. Who were the original recipients of this epistle?
3. When was it written?
4. List four reasons John stated for writing this epistle. (1:4; 2:1; 5:13)
5. List another reason John wrote this epistle. (2:26)
6. What doctrine later found in Gnosticism is addressed in this epistle?
7. What has been suggested as its two-fold purpose?
8. What has been suggested as its theme?

9. What are the main divisions of this epistle as outlined above?