

Book of 1 John

Title:

The epistle's title has always been "1 John".

It is the first and largest in a series of 3 epistles that bear the Apostle John's name.

Since the letter identifies no specific church, location, or individual to whom it was sent, its classification is as a "general epistle".

Although 1 John does not exhibit some of the general characteristics of an epistle common to that time (e.g., no introduction, greeting, or concluding salutation), its intimate tone and content indicate that the term "epistle" still applies to it.

Authorship:

The epistle does not identify the author, but the strong, consistent and earliest testimony of the church ascribes it to John the disciple and apostle (compare Luke 6:13-14).

This anonymity strongly affirms the early church's identification of the epistle with John the apostle, for only someone of John's well known and preeminent status as an apostle would be able to write with such unmistakable authority, expecting complete obedience from his readers, without clearly identifying himself (e.g., 4:6).

He was well known to the readers so he didn't need to mention his name.

This letter could probably be classified as a general letter.

It is as current for our church today, as it was for then.

The apostle John, who wrote the Gospel of John and Revelation, is without doubt the author.

He calls himself "the elder" (see 2 John 1), which seems to have been John's self designation in the final years of his ministry.

The purpose of the letter was probably to help the church avoid error in its teaching.

John and James, his older brother (Acts 12:2), were known as "the sons of Zebedee" (Matt. 10:2-4), whom Jesus gave the name "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17).

John was one of the 3 most intimate associates of Jesus (along with Peter and James; compare Matt. 17:1; 26:37), being an eyewitness to and participant in Jesus' earthly ministry (1:1-4).

In addition to the 3 epistles, John also authored the fourth gospel, in which he identified himself as the disciple “whom Jesus loved”, and as the one who reclined on Jesus’ breast at the Last Supper (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20).

He also wrote the book of Revelation (Rev. 1:1).

Date:

The letter was probably written from Ephesus, but is uncertain.

The exact date of the writing was uncertain, as well.

It was probably written in the 90's A.D.

This letter brings special teaching on Jesus as the Light, Life, and Love.

Church tradition consistently identifies John in his advanced age as living and actively writing during this time at Ephesus in Asia Minor.

The tone of the epistle supports this evidence since the writer gives the strong impression that he is much older than his readers (e.g., “my little children”; 2:1, 18, 28).

The epistle and John’s gospel reflect similar vocabulary and manner of expression (see Historical and Theological Themes).

Such similarity causes many to date the writing of John’s epistles as occurring soon after he composed his gospel.

Since many date the gospel during the latter part of the first century, they also prefer a similar date for the epistles.

Furthermore, the heresy John combats most likely reflects the beginnings of Gnosticism (see Background and Setting), which was in its early stages during the latter third of the first century when John was actively writing.

Since no mention is made of the persecution under Domitian, which began about A.D. 95, it may have been written before that began.

Considering such factors, a reasonable date for 1 John (is ca. A.D. 90-95).

It was likely written from Ephesus to the churches of Asia Minor over which John exercised apostolic leadership.

Background and Setting:

Although he was greatly advanced in age when he penned this epistle, John was still actively ministering to churches.

He was the sole remaining apostolic survivor who had intimate, eyewitness association with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension.

The church Fathers (e.g., Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius), indicate that after that time, John lived at Ephesus in Asia Minor, carrying out an extensive evangelistic program, overseeing many of the churches that had arisen, and conducting an extensive writing ministry (e.g., epistles, The Gospel of John, and Revelation).

One church Father (Papias), who had direct contact with John described him as a “living and abiding voice”.

As the last remaining apostle, John’s testimony was highly authoritative among the churches.

Many eagerly sought to hear the one who had first-hand experience with the Lord Jesus.

Ephesus (compare Acts 19:10), lay within the intellectual center of Asia Minor.

As predicted years before by the Apostle Paul (Acts 20:28-31), false teachers arising from within the church’s own ranks, saturated with the prevailing climate of philosophical trends, began infecting the church with false doctrine, perverting fundamental apostolic teaching.

These false teachers advocated new ideas which eventually became known as “Gnosticism” (from the Greek word “knowledge”).

After the Pauline battle for freedom from the law, Gnosticism was the most dangerous heresy that threatened the early church during the first 3 centuries.

Most likely John was combating the beginning of this virulent heresy that threatened to destroy the fundamentals of the faith and the churches.

John writes “that ye may know that ye have eternal life” (5:13).

In a sense he seeks therefore, merely to strengthen the faith of his readers.

Yet he writes also to combat a specific threat to his readers’ faith: Gnosticism.

This was a deviant form of Christianity.

Its adherents’ views varied, but they tended to value knowledge as the means of salvation (rather than the Cross), to assert that physical matter was evil, and to teach that the Son of God could not, therefore, have come in the flesh.

These and other aberrant teachings seem to be the target of many of John's avowals.

A lack of love for fellow believers characterizes false teachers, especially as they react against anyone rejecting their new way of thinking (3:10-18).

They separated their deceived followers from the fellowship of those who remained faithful to apostolic teaching, leading John to reply that such separation outwardly manifested that those who followed false teachers, lacked genuine salvation (2:19).

Their departure left the other believers, who remained faithful to apostolic doctrine, shaken.

Responding to this crisis, the aged apostle wrote to reassure those remaining faithful and to combat this grave threat to the church.

Since the heresy was so acutely dangerous and the time period was so critical for the church in danger of being overwhelmed by false teaching, John gently, lovingly, but with unquestionable apostolic authority, sent this letter to churches in his sphere of influence to stem this spreading plague of false doctrine.

Historical and Theological Themes:

1 John is distinctive in its emphasis on assurance of salvation.

This stress is seen by the numerous references to what the believer knows (2:3, 5, 29; 3:14, 16, 19, 24; 4:13, 16; 5:15, 18-20).

Further, John often speaks in terms of polarities or contrasting elements: light and darkness, love and hate, God's Spirit and the spirit of Antichrist, God's children and the children of the Devil.

As we go through these 3 letters of John, notice the closeness he had with Jesus that made him even more aware of the person of Jesus.

Considering the circumstances of the epistle, the overall theme of 1 John is "a recall to the fundamentals of the faith" or "back to the basics of Christianity".

The apostle deals with certainties, not opinions or conjecture.

He expresses the absolute character of Christianity in very simple terms; terms that are clear and unmistakable, leaving no doubt as to the fundamental nature of those truths.

A warm, conversational, and above all, loving tone occurs, like a father having a tender, intimate conversation with his children.

1 John also is pastoral, written from the heart of a pastor who has concern for his people.

As a shepherd, John communicated to his flock some very basic, but vitally essential, principles reassuring them regarding the basics of the faith.

He desired them to have joy regarding the certainty of their faith rather than being upset by the false teaching and current defections of some (1:4).

The book's viewpoint, however, is not only pastoral but also polemical; not only positive but also negative.

John refutes the defectors with sound doctrine, exhibiting no tolerance for those who pervert divine truth.

He labels those departing from the truth as "false prophets" (4:1), "those who are trying to deceive" (2:26; 3:7), and "antichrists" (2:18).

He pointedly identifies the ultimate source of all such defection from sound doctrine as demonic (see 4:1-7).

The constant repetition of 3 sub-themes reinforces the overall theme regarding faithfulness to the basics of Christianity: happiness (1:4), holiness (2:1), and security (5:13).

By faithfulness to the basics, his readers will experience these 3 results continually in their lives.

These 3 factors also reveal the key cycle of true spirituality in 1 John: a proper belief in Jesus produces obedience to His commands; obedience issues in love for God and fellow believers (e.g., 3:23-24).

When these 3 (sound faith, obedience, love), operate in concert together, they result in happiness, holiness and assurance.

They constitute the evidence, the litmus test, of a true Christian.

The letter was full of statements stressing what we know of the Lord and His teachings.

It is specifically, or indirectly, mentioned over 30 times.

I have said this before in the gospel of John, but John knew Jesus better than any of the other apostles did.

The love that John had for Jesus, and Jesus for John, was like a very great relationship between two brothers.