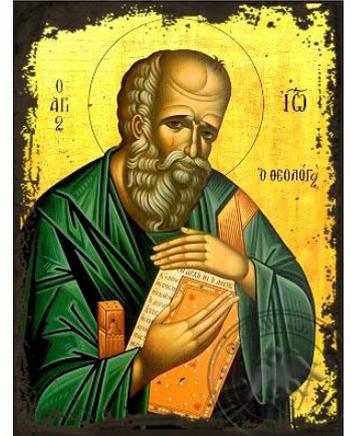


The First Epistle of John

The First Epistle of John: The **Servant**

- The writer of the epistle is the apostle John who wrote *five* books of the NT and was an eye-witness of the life and resurrection of Christ (1.1-3).
- The testimony of the early church places John in Ephesus at the latter part of the first century.
- John does not mention himself by name in his gospel or epistles. He considered himself to be too insignificant! He is called 'the disciple whom Jesus loved' (John 13.23), 'the elder' (2 John 1) and a 'servant' (Revelation 1.1) or 'brother' (Revelation 1.9). In Second and Third John he writes as 'the elder' (man of spiritual maturity). This is most appropriate given the personal nature of the letter and subject matter being discussed (i.e. instructions about home and family life). He also refers to himself as 'the' elder which signifies his unique position of dignity and authority; he was the last surviving apostle. Note. Paul writes his letters as an apostle; Peter as an apostle and elder; John as an elder only. Apostolic authority faded as the church grew in maturity (Ephesians 2.20).
- *Irenaeus* (c.140-202 AD) was the first to quote directly from the epistle and affirm its authorship. *Irenaeus* was a disciple of *Polycarp*, who himself was a disciple of *John*.



The First Epistle of John: Its **Setting**

- Jerome placed John's death 68 years after the death of Christ (c.98-101 AD). John's first epistle is quoted by early second-century church fathers and so must have been copied and distributed some time before this. The evidence suggests a date of c.90 AD for the writing of this epistle. In addition, John does not mention the persecution of the church under Emperor Domitian (c.95 AD) suggesting the letter was written earlier
- John likely wrote from Ephesus so the epistle was probably first circulated amongst the churches of Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3). The recipients were therefore predominantly Gentile, with some Jews of the diaspora. It seems the believers were generally well established in apostolic truth which they had heard 'from the beginning' (2.7, 24).
- Unlike his second and third epistles, John does not write this letter to any particular individual or church. It seems to be written for the whole *family* of God (i.e. every believer). Thus, *seven* times he refers to his readers as 'little (dear) children' (diminutive of affection). Peter speaks of believers as *pilgrims* in the wilderness (1 Peter 2.11); Paul as *members* of the body (1 Corinthians 12.27); John as *children* in a spiritual family.
- John gives *seven* clear reasons for writing his epistle:
 - Salvation (1.3). To witness to the Word of Life and establish fellowship with God through Him.
 - Song (1.4). *And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full.*
 - Sanctification (2.1). *My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not.*
 - Strengthen (2.12-14) and encourage all God's family (children, fathers and young men).
 - Safety (2.21). To re-affirm the truth of God they had heard from the beginning.
 - Seducers (2.26). To guard against deceivers and false teachers.
 - Surety (5.13). *These things have I written unto you... that ye may know that ye have eternal life.*
- The principal reason that occasioned the writing of the epistle was to warn believers of the dangers presented by false teachers – variously called 'seducers' (2.26), 'false prophets' (4.1), 'deceivers' (2 John 7) and 'antichrists' (2.18; 4.3; 2 John 7). Their teaching created confusion amongst genuine believers (2.19). Did they really have a personal relationship with God? Had they truly received eternal life? Had they believed 'the truth' or a lie? Cf. 2.4-5; 5.11-13. *Carson: John finds he must reassure the faithful and explain in straightforward terms the differences between the two groups and thereby give them grounds for their own assurance and confidence before God at a time when they were being made to feel inferior and spiritually threatened.*
- It is difficult to specifically identify the 'seducers' but there are indications in the epistle as to the nature of their teachings and behaviour. **First**, they were not true believers (1.6) and did not obey the word of God (2.4). They were indifferent towards their 'brethren' and did not show the same kind of *love* Christ enjoins upon every believer (2.9, 11; 3.15; 4.20). **Second**, they claimed sinless perfection (1.8, 10) but kept on sinning (3.6, 10). Their 'high knowledge' apparently lifted them into a superior liberty by which sins were not sins to them. **Third**, they denied that the historical Jesus came in the flesh (4.2) and was the Christ (2.22-23). There was also some denial of the efficacy of the blood of Christ to forgive sins (5.6).

- These false teachers were propounding an early form of **Gnosticism** called *Docetism*. Gnostics professed to be Christians but claimed to have additional knowledge which was superior to the teaching of the apostles (but note 2.20-21). Gnosticism did not reach full bloom until the middle and end of the second century, spawning false writings such as the *Gospel of Thomas* and *Gospel of Judas*. Gnostics presented an intellectual approach to religion, offering 'hidden' wisdom. They were elitist and arrogantly scorned the unenlightened – being highly intolerant and even hostile towards those who did not believe their teachings.
- *Derickson: Its teachings blended Greek dualism with Eastern mysticism. It adopted the dualistic view that only the nonmaterial, or 'spirit,' was good while anything material was evil. Along with this came Eastern mysticism's focus on secret knowledge reserved only for the chosen few.* Thus they taught that for God to be truly good, He had to be pure spirit and could not have created a material universe. Therefore, the God of the OT was a lesser god – an emanation from the true God. In addition, the Lord Jesus could not have had a physical body as this would make Him part of the 'evil' material world. Hence Docetism (from *dokeo*, 'seem' or 'have the appearance') claimed Christ only *appeared* to have a physical body and die on the cross (cp. 1.1; 4.2). In addition, sin was inconsequential as it was committed in the body and had no effect on the spirit.
- A form of Docetism was promoted by **Cerinthus**. He was the first to distinguish Jesus (the earthly man of Nazareth) and Christ (a heavenly deity). He taught that the *Christ* spirit descended on the man *Jesus* at His baptism but left him before the crucifixion (cf. 5.1, 11). Irenaeus records (via Polycarp) that John once fled the public baths in Ephesus after discovering Cerinthus was present. He cried: '*Let us save ourselves; the bath house may fall down, for inside is Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth.*'
- The relevance of these things must not be understated – Gnosticism is alive and well today. There are many who deny the deity of Christ (JWs). Some seek to separate the Lord Jesus into two persons – Man and God. New Calvinists (like Mark Driscoll) advocate carefree Christian living. 'You are free in Christ to be weird'.

The First Epistle of John: The Subject

- John's Gospel was written that 'ye might *have* life through His name' (John 20.31). The good news historically. The First Epistle was written 'ye may *know* that ye have eternal life' (5.13). The good news experientially.
- In summary, the **Gospel** of John = *pronouncement* of divine truth (Christ is the Truth). **1 John** = *practice* of divine truth (evidence is expected in the lives of those who profess to know the truth). **2 John** = *protection* of divine truth (the door is to be *closed* to *false* teachers). **3 John** = *propagation* of divine truth (the door is to be *opened* to those who *further* the truth).
- The main subject of First John is the **eternal life** we have in Christ. Eternal life originates in the Son of God *essentially* and is *manifested* in Him. Because we believe on Christ, we possess the same divine life and nature, for our fellowship is with the Father and His Son (1.3). The rest of the epistle sets out how eternal life is manifested in the life of the believer. Christianity is not just a matter of saying; it is a matter of doing. Christianity is not just a matter of profession; it is a matter of practice.
- Thus, there are *seven* tests of a **true** profession with the repetition of the phrases 'born of God' or 'born of Him'. The true believer: 'doeth righteousness' (2.29); 'doth not commit (habitual) sin' (3.9); 'loveth' (4.7); 'believeth that Jesus is the Christ' (5.1); 'loves God and keeps His commandments' (5.1-2); 'overcometh the world' (5.4) and 'sinneth not' (habitually), knowing (by observation) he is 'of God' (5.18-19).
- There are also *seven* tests of a **false** profession introduced with the phrases: 'if we say', 'he that saith' and 'if a man say' (1.6, 8, 10; 2.4, 6, 9; 4.20).
- This is the epistle of no compromise. John clearly differentiates the true and the false; the black and the white. Note the contrasts between: light and darkness (1.5-2.11); the Father and the world (2.12-17); Christ and antichrist (2.18-28); good works and evil works (2.29-3.24); the Spirit of truth and spirit of error (4.1-6); love and hate (4.7-21); and those born of God and born of the devil (5.1-21).

The First Epistle of John: Its Structure (see chart)

- As with his gospel, John emphasises the themes of *life*, *light* and *love*. The prologue and epilogue emphasise **life**; the Word of Life is declared (1.1-4) and eternal life is manifested (5.1-21). The main body of the epistle breaks into two parts presenting the character of God as **light** (1.5-2.29) and **love** (3.1-4.21). Within each section are a series of 'tests of fellowship', i.e. the possession of eternal life. These tests can be classified as: moral, devotional and doctrinal, or the tests of *light* (2.29), *love* (4.7) and *life* (5.1, 11-12).