

Introduction To 1-3 John

I. *Purpose*

- A. It is clear in 1 John that a developing division within the church led to its writing. The difficulty had already reached a point where some members, including teachers, had separated themselves from the others (1 John 2:19). There were still those who were trying to "seduce" them (2:26).
- B. The false teachers denied Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God (2:22; 5:1, 5); the coming of Christ in the flesh (4:2; 2 John 7); the authority of Jesus' commands (2:4); their own sinfulness (1:8, 10); salvation through the work of Christ (2:2); the demand that Christians love one another (2:9); righteous conduct as a requirement of fellowship with God (1:6; 2:29; 3:6, 10); the responsibility to live as Jesus had lived (2:4, 6; 3:7); the nature of Christians in fellowship with the Father, with His Son, and with one another (1:3; 2:11); and the authority of the writer of the letters as the proclaimer of the message that had been from the beginning (1:5; 3 John 10).
- C. John responded to the false teachers by recognizing them as a supreme danger threatening the church. What was called for was a reaffirmation of the doctrines of the gospel that had been from the beginning and a clear exposure of the heresies the false teachers were promoting. He also reassured the faithful. The letters' contents are marked by strong affirmations and words of encouragement for the church -- namely, that the nature of the fellowship is one of love and righteousness (1:3, 7); that its origin is from the beginning (1:1); that in the church there is genuine forgiveness of sins (1:9) and faithful obedience like Jesus' own example (2:6); that walking in the light is living in love (2:10); that members of the church will not be ashamed at Jesus' coming (2:28); and that they may have complete confidence in His answering their prayers (3:22). Warnings are addressed to the church against the seduction of the world (2:15), against the antichrist, (2:18), and against false spirits and false prophets (3:22; 4:1-2). Reminders to the members of their anointing (2:20) as being sufficient to enable them to remain in God (4:13) are provided, as well as promises that belong to them as the children of God (3:1). Jesus Christ as the epitome and example of love to the church is an important theme (3:16-18), just like the proclamations that God Himself is love (4:16), that love derives from Him, and that life is lived in Him (4:12-13) are also critical themes. Again and again the letter returns to the primary confession that Jesus is the Christ, the one who

has come in the flesh and has overcome the world. He is the true God and eternal life (5:20).

- D. John's letters address the problem of error in an unusual way. He states that true faith requires knowing that Jesus the Christ came in human flesh, lived a human life, and died in the flesh. But the evidence of that faith is measured more by the righteousness of one's life, rather than by what one "knows."
 - 1. The knowledge that God is light is tested by whether one walks in that light and obeys God's commands.
 - 2. The knowledge that God is righteous is tested by whether one lives righteously as befits one born of God.
 - 3. The knowledge that God is love is tested by whether one loves fellow Christians even as one loves God.
 - 4. The requirement for love and obedience in these letters is reminiscent of Jesus' own teaching and the response He required of those who would follow Him.
- E. Second John addresses the same basic historical events as 1 John: false teachers are assaulting the Christians of which John is familiar.
- F. Like 2 John, 3 John addresses the issue of a Christian's duty to show love and hospitality with the bounds of faithfulness to the truth. Second John revealed the negative side: false teachers are not to be granted hospitality. Third John expresses the positive side: all who embrace the truth are to be loved and cared for.

II. **Authorship**

- A. Hebrews and 1 John are the only two epistles in the New Testament that do not identify their authors. But from the first century until the late eighteenth century, Christians consistently identified the author as the apostle John.
- B. There are possible or definite allusions to 1 John in late first and early second century works. External evidence for John's authorship is preserved in the writings of Irenaeus, who quotes extensively from 1 John and attributes this letter to John. The Muratorian Canon (c. A.D. 200) assumes that the works of John have a common origin and that they have been received as such by the church.
- C. Although John does not name himself in 1 John, the internal evidence strongly supports that he wrote the epistle.
 - 1. The epistle displays remarkable similarities to the gospel of John. 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 falsehood).
 - 2. Their grammatical styles are also similar. The two books also have many words and phrases -- some of which are found nowhere else

- in the New Testament -- in common. The vocabularies of 1 John and the gospel of John are more similar than those of Luke and Acts, Ephesians and Colossians, or 1 Timothy and Titus, which are known to have come from the same writer.
3. The author of 1 John also claims to have been an eyewitness to the events of Christ's life (1:1-4), in contrast to the second-generation Christians he addressed. This considerably narrows the field of possible authors.
- D. John, the son of Zebedee, was a prosperous fisherman on the Sea of Galilee who owned his own boat and had hired servants (Mark 1:20). He was a disciple of John the Baptist (cf. John 1:35-40), and was part of the inner circle of the apostles (Matthew 17:1; Mark 5:37; 13:3; 14:33). John lived until the time of the Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117) and was banished to the island of Patmos. It was there that he had received and wrote the visions described in the book of Revelation.
- E. Second John has very close similarities with 1 John (e.g., vs. 5 and 1 John 2:7; 3:11; vs. 6 and 1 John 5:3; vs. 7 and 1 John 2:18-26; vs. 9 and 1 John 2:23; vs. 12 and 1 John 1:14) make it clear that it was also written by John the apostle. The same is true for 3 John and 2 John (e.g., vs. 1 and 2 John 1; vs. 4 and 2 John 4; vs. 13 and 2 John 12; vs. 15 and 2 John 12). All of this makes it extremely likely that John wrote all three letters.

III. **Date And Addressees**

- A. Although it contains no clear historical indications of when or where they were written, John most likely composed all the letters in the latter part of the first century at Ephesus. Ephesus as the place of the three letters' publication finds support from two lines of tradition.
1. Irenaeus (c. A.D. 175–200) stated explicitly that John wrote his material while living at Ephesus in Asia. The earliest-known references to 1 John are by those from Asia. Polycarp of Smyrna (mid-second century) appears to have been depending on 1 John when he asserted that whoever does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is antichrist. He also urges a return to the message handed down from the beginning (cf. 1 John 1:1, 3).
 2. A comparison of the problems presented in 1 John with the more complete description of the errors of the second century provides additional support for Ephesus as the place where the letters of John originated.
 - a) The tradition identifying Cerinthus as the opponent of 1 John also depends on Irenaeus. He preserved a description from Polycarp of an encounter between the apostle and Cerinthus in a

public bathhouse, which John hurriedly left so that he would not have to bathe in the same place with such an enemy of truth.

- b) Irenaeus also described in some detail the error of Cerinthus. Cerinthus, he said, denied the virgin birth of Jesus. After His baptism, Christ descended on Jesus in the form of a dove from God in heaven, and He began His ministry of preaching and miracles. Christ departed from Jesus on the cross, and it was only Jesus who suffered and rose again.
- (1) It is not absolutely certain, however, that Cerinthus was the opponent of John or that the error in view in the letter resulted from a Gnostic movement that had infiltrated the church. First John itself strongly suggests that the error arose within the church and was propagated by teachers in the church who had left the faith (2:19). The seriousness of the situation probably derived from the fact that past members had become "false prophets," teaching falsehood and becoming embodiments of the antichrist.
 - (2) The attempt to identify the false teachers with Cerinthus or his followers is therefore difficult. The espousal of sinlessness (1:8, 10), their claim to know God through inspiration (2:4; 4:1-3), their loss of "fellowship" with God (1:6), and their life in the light (2:9) does not have a parallel in Cerinthus' teaching.
 - (3) However the error originated, it was beginning to develop toward the end of the first century.
- B. The apostle's repeated references to his readers as "little children" (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21) implies that he was much older than them and that he wrote 1 John toward the end of his life.
- C. Furthermore, the lack of any reference to the persecution under Emperor Domitian (c. A.D. 95) suggests that John wrote before it began. Finally, 1 John was probably written after the gospel of John. Since John wrote his gospel about A.D. 80-90, a date of A.D. 90-95 for the three letters of John is reasonable.
- D. Second John was addressed to the "elect lady," probably a reference to a local church while 3 John is addressed to an individual, Gaius, making it the most personal of the three letters.