

1 JOHN

Living In Discernment and Certainty in an Uncertain World

Introduction and Overview

INTRODUCTION

1. Many people view the early churches, under the leadership of the Apostles, as ideal and harmonious. *“Oh, to be a part of the early church!”*
2. There could not have been disgruntled people, unrighteous or selfish conduct, nor could they have struggled with doctrinal difficulties, or people with selfish ambition, or spiritual warfare against Satan’s kingdom.
3. The Early Church wrestled with difficulties like that of today.

I. BACKGROUND

A. Summarized

- Though not mentioned in the book, it has been historically assumed and recognized that the Apostle John is the author.
- It was written to believers in Asia Minor, today’s region of Turkey, the churches mentioned in Revelation 2-3.
- It is believed that he wrote this while he lived and ministered in Ephesus and the surrounding region.
- Churches founded A.D. 50’s by Paul.
- Paul wrote the Book of Ephesians in mid 60s.
- It is several decades later when scholars believe that 1 John was written around A.D. 85 to 95
- We can understand some of 1 John's historical context by reading the letter's content and Revelation 2 and 3, which describe the state of the churches at that time.

B. Reasons for Writing

- It is generally agreed that John’s letters are products of historical context.
- At the time of the writing, Christians were experiencing a crisis of faith because of 1) persecution (severe by the Roman Emperors), 2) false doctrine and practices, and 3) an increase in satanic activity.
 - Four of the seven churches in Revelation 2 & 3 mention the assault and activity of Satan’s kingdom in their cities/churches.
- He is pastoral in his concern for writing this letter. His concern is to protect and establish his readers' understanding of their faith and their standing with God in life.
- He describes his purpose for writing this letter in that their:
 - 1) joy would be complete (1:4),

1 John 1:4 (ESV) And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

2) they would not sin (2:1),

1 John 2:1 (ESV) My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not

sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

3) Expose deception (2:26).¹

1 John 2:26 (ESV) I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.

4) Certainty of eternal life (5:13).

1 John 5:13 (ESV) I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

C. John's Ministry in Asia

- *During the first century's sixties and seventies, the Church in Asia Minor was greatly affected by the immigration of Christians during the Jewish War in A.D. 66.*
- *John became closely associated with the church at Ephesus and the surrounding churches of Asia Minor.*
 - *It is believed that John left Jerusalem around A.D. 67, just before Rome assaulted Jerusalem and its subsequent destruction.*
 - *Tradition has it that John lived longer than the other Apostles.*
 - *Therefore, he was the sole eyewitness to Jesus Christ's life and ministry toward the end of the first century.*
 - *You can imagine his influence on those who valued the first-hand information concerning Jesus Christ.*
 - *This would be especially true if these people wrestle with claims of novel teaching concerning Jesus.*²
- *It is said by early church fathers that church leaders would travel from faraway places to learn from John and hear his stories about Jesus.*
- *It is believed that John died and was buried in Ephesus.*³

D. John's Audience

- *John's letter is filled with considerable theological content, but it is structured in a personal manner.*⁴
- *Some view it as a legitimate conjecture to assume John was not only an elder/pastor within a local group of people but also a custodian of Jesus's traditions and truth in the Mediterranean world.*⁵
- *John's community of believers were heterogeneous:*
 - ***Jews** who moved into the Greek world with those who knew nothing of the Old Testament.*

¹Ibid.

²F.F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1970) p. 13-15.

³Gary M. Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary, Letters of John*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), p. 21-22.

⁴Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, 17.

⁵Burge, *The NIV Application Commentary*, 24.

- Their *koinonia* was a firm allegiance to the message and person of Jesus the Messiah.⁶

II. CIRCUMSTANCES AND CONDITIONS

- Chaos and conflict are being addressed in 1 John.
- The chaos and conflict were centered around a *theological error* that had practical ramifications of *errant conduct*.
 - John wanted to avoid the confusion and instability that can come to people during such a situation.
- John does not write new doctrine in this letter but reiterates what Jesus and the other apostles have taught in their teachings.

A. Theological Error

1. The Doctrine of Christ

- One issue of theological concern centered around teaching concerning the person of Jesus Christ, or Christology.
- *Jesus of Nazareth was not God in the flesh, the Christ* (2:21-23; 4:2).
 - It is believed that there was (1) a group of Jewish heritage who did not accept the divine *Messiahship* of Jesus,
 - and (2) a group of Greek-pagan heritage who did not accept the Messiah being fully human.⁷
- *John was addressing those who thought of Jesus as less than God to remind them of His deity and not fully man to affirm His full humanity.*
- Those who viewed Jesus of Nazareth as not being able to be God in the flesh were influenced by the pagan religion and Greek culture that gave rise to **Docetism**.
 - The essentials of this belief were that *matter was essentially evil and spirit was essentially good*.
 - There could not be a peaceful coexistence between the two. It was unthinkable that there could be any direct relation between the supreme God, who was spirit, and the material universe, which, according to their belief system, was essentially evil.⁸
- **Christianity confessed** *a real and fully human person named Jesus of Nazareth, who was also God the Son, their divine Lord.*
- **The Greek dualist's natural response was,** *“How could the true God indwell a human body of flesh and blood?”*
 - Their answer was that since this was an impossibility, **the human body of flesh and blood was not real but imaginary—it only seemed to be.**⁹

⁶Ibid., 22.

⁷Stephen S. Smalley, Word Biblical Commentary, 1,2,3 John, ed. David A. Hubbard and Glenn W. Barker (Waco: Word Books, Publisher, 1984), p. xxiii.

⁸F.F. Bruce, The Epistles of John, 16.

⁹This belief is known as *docetism*, from the Greek word “dokein” which means “to seem.”

- Another explanation¹⁰ The Greek dualist worldview held that Christ descended on the man Jesus of Nazareth in the form of a dove after he was baptized, empowering Him to perform miracles and proclaim, “the unknown Father,” but who left Him before He died so that Jesus suffered and rose again while “the Christ” remained immune from suffering since he was a spiritual being.¹¹

2. The Doctrine of Salvation

- A second issue of theological error John addressed is **Gnosticism**.
- This broad term embraced several *pagan, Jewish, and semi-Christian* systems.
 - It combined elements of *Western intellectualism* and *Eastern mysticism* and did not become a fully recognizable system until the second century A D.
 - Its two main principles were (1) the impurity of matter and (2) the supremacy of special or mystical knowledge.¹²
- Gnostics viewed a person's physical body as a prison in which the rational or spiritual part of human beings needed to be delivered by enlightenment, special or mystical knowledge, or light reserved for only a select few.
 - The initiated were the truly *spiritual people*.
 - In these experiences, these people claimed to have intimate access to God.
- On the extreme end of this system, *people believed one could become so enlightened that evil, or the physical, could not harm them spiritually; the spiritual and the physical were so separated.*
- This was true righteousness in their estimation, and they were, therefore, righteous irrespective of their behavior!¹³
- **These new teachers, with a new doctrine, claimed to have reached such an advanced stage in spiritual experience that they were beyond good and evil.**
- This is why we see John's teachings as similar to the saying that if you say that you know God and yet live in darkness, you lie and do not know the truth.
- Embracing any belief system cannot but affect how one lives.

3. The Doctrine of Sanctification

- a. **Physical conduct is of no consequence.**
 - This belief system was infiltrating the church.

¹⁰This belief is known as *Cerinthianism*, supposedly because a man named “Cerinthus,” a resident of Asia and trained in Egypt is responsible for this teaching.

¹¹Ibid., 17.

¹²John Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentary*, 49.

¹³Ibid., 50.

- b. **John highlights the incongruent belief system.**¹⁴
- they boast they have fellowship with God, yet don't live in fellowship with Christians,
 - they boast they are "without sin" yet live a sinless life. (1:8,10)
 - they boast they have fellowship with God but walk in the darkness (1:6)
 - they boast that they know God but nevertheless are disobedient to God's known commands (2:4)
 - they boast that they "love God" but hate their fellow Christians (4:20),
 - they boast they are "in the light" but hate their fellow Christians.
- c. **John also highlights these errant views with corrective teaching.**¹⁵
- to abide in God is to obey Him--it is to walk as Jesus walked (2:6)
 - to habitually sin willfully shows that one does not know God (3:3-6; 5:18)
 - whoever regularly practices sin belongs to the devil (3:7-10)
 - we should love one another (3:11-12, 17-18)
 - refusing to love a fellow Christian means that one does not have eternal life (3:14-15)
 - God is love--and to know Him is to love (4:8-10)
- d. **There is a relationship between understanding the doctrine of Christ and the practical living of life or sanctification.**
- *If these people deny their own sinfulness due to these special and exclusive revelations or that the evil of their lives is cared for through these special revelations, they will sense no need for God's forgiveness through Jesus' atoning work on the cross.*

B. The Reality and Opposition of Satan's Kingdom.

C. Practical Realities of the Church

1. The Pain of Division

- In this situation, it was impossible for those who propagated and embraced the new teaching to continue with those who held to the historic doctrinal position of Christ and the means of obtaining a righteous standing with God.
- *The teachers, with the new and novel doctrines of their special enlightenment, led their followers out of the fellowship of those who refused to abandon the historical tradition.*

2. Disturbed and Doubting Believers

- Christians who remained needed to be reassured. They were undoubtedly shaken by the departure of the others.
- These people undoubtedly spoke in superior terms of their special initiation into true knowledge, indicating, if not accusing, the traditionalists of shutting

¹⁴Gary M. Burge, The NIV Application Commentary, 31.

¹⁵Ibid.

their eyes to true enlightenment and *superior spirituality*.

- The traditionalists wondered if their foundation was as secure as they thought.

III. JOHN'S MESSAGE

- John's message is about certainty, confidence, assurance, and boldness.
 - Characteristic verbs are *to perceive and to know*, while a characteristic noun communicates confidence in attitude.
- One can know with certainty, in an objective fashion, truth.

A. Who is Jesus Christ

- John will answer with certainty who Jesus Christ is, how He came to earth, and why He came to earth.

B. Who Has Eternal Life

- He will answer that one can be certain about their standing with God and that they either have or do not have eternal life.

C. The Conduct of Those with Eternal Life

- He will confidently answer that conduct characterizes those who truly know God and His Son Jesus Christ.
 - *He will speak to the significance of righteousness and love in the life of the community of God's people.*

D. Who Can Know Truth and How

- He will write with certainty that one can know the truth, that every Christian has the same capacity to know and understand God and revelation concerning God; it is not by exclusive mystical experiences for the elite.
 - Every genuine Christian can enjoy intimate personal communion with God.
 - Every Christian can have discernment as to what is truth and error as new teachings surface.
 - Individual experience can and must be weighed against the truth revealed.

APPLICATION

1. We live in a world of great and constant change and uncertainty.

- Sociologists say that new innovations are changing our lives and culture significantly every five years or less.

2. We live in a world of pluralism and relativity.

- The attitude is that you cannot know anything for sure. There is no absolute truth; everything is fluid as humans determine what truth.

3. 1ST John will be a shock to our culture.

- This is due to how our culture has shaped us. He speaks with certainty and absolutes.

TITLE SLIDE