

1 John (November 22)

Reading 1 John

Love and the church as a family are the dominating themes of John's letters. He warns against those who would divide the Christian family from fellowship with the heavenly Father and his beloved Son. John presents himself as an "elder," a parent or older brother to the community of faith. Like someone leading a toddler by the hand, John guides the church away from dangerous false doctrines so that she may walk in the light.

Author and Date

The author is John son of Zebedee – the apostle and the author of the Gospel of John and Revelation. He was a fisherman, one of Jesus' inner circle (together with James and Peter), and the "disciple whom Jesus loved." Unlike most New Testament letters, 1 John does not tell us who its author is. The similarity to the style of the Gospel of John, the mention of eyewitness testimony, the suggestions of advanced age, and the indication of a close relationship with the Lord confirm this traditional identification of John as the author.

The letter is difficult to date with precision. Since the author of 1 John seems to build on concepts and themes found in the fourth Gospel, it is reasonable to date the letter somewhere between AD 85 and 95, after the writing of the Gospel, which may have been written circa 85.

Gnosticism

One of the most dangerous heresies of the first two centuries was Gnosticism. Its central teaching was that the spirit is entirely good and matter is entirely evil. From this unbiblical dualism flowed five important errors:

- Man's body, which is matter, is therefore evil. It is to be contrasted with God, who is wholly spirit and therefore good.
- Salvation is the escape from the body, achieved not through faith in Christ but by special knowledge (the Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnosis*, hence Gnosticism).
- Christ's true humanity was denied in two ways: some said that Christ only seemed to have a body (Docetism); others said that the divine Christ joined the man Jesus at baptism and left him before he died (Cerinthianism).
- Since the body was considered evil, it was to be treated harshly.
- Paradoxically, this dualism also led to licentiousness. The reasoning was that, since matter – and not the breaking of God's law – was considered evil, breaking his law was of no moral consequence.

Occasion and Purpose

John's readers were confronted with an early form of Gnostic teaching of the Cerinthian variety. Consequently, John wrote this letter with two basic purposes in mind: to expose false teachers and to give believers assurance of their salvation. In keeping with his intention to combat Gnostic teachers, John specifically struck at their total lack of morality; and by giving eyewitness testimony to the incarnation, he sought to confirm his readers' belief in the incarnate Christ. Success in this would give the writer joy.

Blessings for Readers

As you study the letters of John, pray for the peace and blessing of your congregation and fellowship. Greet your fellow Christians as beloved brothers and sisters, for whom Christ gave his life. Although John provides strong warnings against false teachers and their doctrines, he will also help you understand the true character of Christian love, faith, and good works.