Introduction to 1 John

FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD THE FATHER AND GOD THE SON

Key Verse: 1:3

“We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.”

*Author, Date and Place of Writing*

The author of this letter is not mentioned by name. However, there is strong evidence that the author is Apostle John. First, the author was an eye-witness to Jesus’ life on earth (1:1-3). Second, the vocabulary he used and the themes he emphasized strongly echo John’s Gospel. For example, his expression “the Word of life” to describe Jesus is distinctive to John (1Jn 1:1; Jn 1:1). We find in both books the themes of “light and darkness,” “life and death,” “love and hate,” and “truth and lies,” as well as an emphasis on Jesus as God Incarnate, and loving one another. Third, early Church fathers Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian all ascribe the authorship of 1 John to John. John’s testimony is legitimate as a personal witness of Jesus during his life on earth (1:1).

Little can be known about the date and place of writing from the letter of 1 John itself. On the basis of external evidence, we can date it to the early 90’s A.D. Possibly John wrote from Ephesus, where he served a circuit of churches for many years.

*Recipients*

This letter is written to believers with whom John seems to have had a very intimate relationship. Seven times he refers to the audience as “my little children,” or “little children” (2:1,12,28; 3:7,18; 4:4; 5:21). Six times he refers to them as “dear friends” (beloved) (2:7; 3:2,21; 4:1,7,11). It is most likely that the believers he is writing to were living in Asia Minor, and had been influenced by the church at Ephesus. This would include the seven churches he mentions in Revelation 2-3.

*Genre*

1 John is regarded as an epistle because of the frequent use of the words “I am writing to you.” As a spiritual father, John addresses his children directly in order to instruct them. It is sermonic in tone and contains strong doctrinal statements. However, it is different from the standard pattern of Hellenistic letters in the first century which mention the author, recipients, greetings, body, and benediction. 1 John is a different form of letter. It does not mention who the author is. The recipients are not clearly addressed. There is no benediction or ending.

*Historical Background of the Letter*

*Gnosticism.* In order to understand this letter, we should grasp the idea of gnosticism. The term “gnosticism” comes from the Greek word “gnosis” which means “knowledge.” It designates a variety of beliefs, fundamental to which was a dualistic view of reality. They believed in a supreme being who lived in the spiritual world but had nothing to do with the material world. They thought the material world was the creation of an inferior being, who kept mankind imprisoned in material existence. They regarded the spiritual world as good and the material world as evil. To them, human beings were good spirits imprisoned in evil bodies, and salvation was the setting free of the spirit from their body. For this purpose, they tried to gain “secret knowledge” or “enlightenment,” which came to people through divine redeemers. They thought that Jesus was one of these divine redeemers. To them, Jesus was not God, but just one in a series of emanations from the supreme being. They exalted secret knowledge over faith in Jesus. They also divided Christians into groups, with one group superior--based on their secret knowledge or enlightenment. To them, there was no concept of sin or repentance but only illusion and enlightenment. They believed that how a person lived in the body had no impact on their spiritual essence. Some used this teaching to justify indulging in pleasures of the flesh. Others took a harsh view of the body and lived ascetic lives.

*The influence of Gnosticism on the church.* This letter is a response to the rise of antichrists in the churches (2:26). They claimed to believe in Jesus, but they denied that Jesus is the Son of God and especially that he came in the flesh. In this way, they justified living a sinful life, denying Jesus’ victory over sin, death and the devil and they spread false teachings. They confused many believers who had remained faithful to Christ and his church, and tried to lead them astray (2:19,26).

*Purpose of Writing*

John’s words “I write to you,” or variations thereof, which appear several times, reveal his purpose in writing (1:4; 2:1,12,13[2],14[3],26; 5:13). One purpose is to plant assurance of faith, and the other is to help them be able to discern truth from lies. He plants assurance that those who believe that Jesus is the Christ are children of God; they have eternal life and experience victory over the world; they practice righteousness and the love of God. Loving one another is the main expression of their faith. They obey Jesus, keep his commands, and do what is right in his sight.

John also helped the believers who remained in the church to discern lies from the truth, children of God from the children of the devil, and Christ from the antichrist. He taught them that anyone who denies that Jesus is Christ--the Son of God, is a liar and denies the Father also (2:22). He also taught them to test the spirits. Anyone who denies that “Jesus came in the flesh” is the antichrist (4:1-3). In brief, to deny either Jesus’ full deity or his full humanity makes one the antichrist. John taught believers to be discerning so that they would have genuine fellowship with God the Father, the Son and one another.

*Main Theme*

The main theme of this letter is that Jesus is the Son of God who came from the Father and entered this world in the flesh. He made atonement for the sins of the world and destroyed the devil’s work. Those who believe in Jesus enter into fellowship with God the Father, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with one another. They have assurance of forgiveness of sins and eternal life. They love God, love their brothers and sisters, and obey Jesus’ command.

*Characteristics*

Fellowship in truth and love. The word “fellowship” from the Greek word “koinonia” appears four times in 1 John. This word is used only nine times in the New Testament. Its distinctive use in 1 John is very meaningful. In 1:3 John writes, “We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ.” Usually, the word "fellowship" refers to friendly associations with people who share the same interests, like a club. But the fellowship mentioned by John is quite different. It is not mere human fellowship, because God the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ are at its center. This fellowship is the eternal fellowship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit (the Triune God). Those who deny the Father and the Son are deprived of this fellowship. They remain in the darkness, hate others and become enemies of God. However, those who acknowledge that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh as the Son of God enter into that fellowship and have eternal life (1:2; 2:25; 5:11,13,20). Christian fellowship is based on the truth that Jesus is God.

Since God is love, Christian fellowship is characterized by love (2:5; 3:11,16,23b; 4:8,16). Before knowing Jesus, we don’t know what true love is. The word “love” appears 46 times in 1 John and is always translated from the Greek word “agape.” There are four Greek words that are translated “love” in English: “eros,” “philia,” “storge,” and “agape.” “Eros” refers generally to romantic love, “phileo” to brotherly love or friendship, “storge” to affectionate love (especially as parents for children), and “agape” to selfless, unconditional love like God’s steadfast love. Jesus demonstrated agape love in a new way when he laid down his life for sinners (3:16). Through Jesus we come to know what agape love is. We can say that this is the greatest love and true love. This love is not expressed in words alone, but in actions and truth (3:18). When we love others in this way we come to know God’s love more deeply. We can also identify ourselves as Christians to the world. This love motivates believers to love others and build up a strong and fruitful fellowship (4:7-8,10-11,19). This kind of loving fellowship has the power to resist the antichrist and overcome the world and testify that Jesus is God and that God is love.

Jesus Christ is God Incarnate. From the beginning of his letter, John proclaimed that the Word of Life--eternal life--who was with the Father has appeared in the flesh. John, along with the other apostles, were witnesses who heard, saw, looked at and touched him (1:1-2). By sharing this testimony John helps believers come into fellowship with God the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. Through this fellowship we can know who God truly is. For this purpose Jesus came into the world to lay down his life as the atoning sacrifice for our sins.

John describes God’s attributes mainly in two ways: God is light (1:5), and God is love (4:8,16b). Of course, God is much more than these attributes, but John emphasizes them to help believers discern false teaching about God and Christ. God is fully revealed  through the Son, who was sent in the flesh by the Father (4:14). God dwells in unapproachable light, where no human being can come near (1Ti 6:16). He revealed himself by sending his Son into the world as a human being to have fellowship with us. This demonstrates his love. In fact, Jesus Christ is God incarnate. Therefore, whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father (2:22-23). By the same token, anyone who denies that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is the antichrist.

The work of Jesus Christ. The obstacles that prevent human beings from having fellowship with God are sin and the devil. Sin is lawlessness, that is, breaking God’s commands (3:4). It is rebellion against God instigated by the devil (3:8a). Jesus came into the world to take away our sins as the atoning sacrifice and to destroy the devil’s work (2:2; 3:5,8b; 4:10).

Believers’ conviction. The believers had been influenced by those who left the fellowship, whom John refers to as antichrists (2:18-19). Those who left denied some essential truths of the Christian faith: 1) that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh (2:22); 2) that Jesus Christ is the Son of God (2:23); 3) and that they were sinners (1:8,10). At the same time, they claimed to have fellowship with God even though they remained in sin and even hated others (3:6,9,14-15). When the believers saw this, they were confused about what they should believe. John wanted them to have conviction of faith based on the truth so they would stand firm on the truth. John reminded them that they had an anointing from the Holy One and that all of them knew the truth and belonged to the truth (2:20; 3:19). This knowledge of the truth is not obtained by mere study or meditation. It comes through experiencing the Holy Spirit who convinces us (3:24). This is why the author repeats the phrase, “This is how we know” many times (2:5,18; 3:10,16,19,24; 4:13; 5:2), and the word “know” 37 times (ESV). On the basis of this knowledge, John exhorted the believers to have confidence before God (3:21; 4:17; 5:14).

Believers’ lifestyle. Those who have fellowship with God will show the evidence by what they believe and how they live. Their belief must be grounded on basic Biblical truths: 1) Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came in the flesh; 2) Jesus Christ is the atoning sacrifice for our sins; 3) we are sinners; 4) when we confess our sins, Jesus forgives our sins and purifies us from unrighteousness (1:9); we do not continue to sin; 5) God is love and believers love their brothers and sisters (3:23; 4:16b,21).

John’s symphonic writing style. John’s writing style is not linear with systematic logical development. It is a circular style that introduces key themes and revisits them with increasing detail and clarity. To develop the meaning of these themes John uses sharp contrasts: Love and hate (love 46 times, hate 5 times); Light and darkness (light 6 times, darkness 7 times); Life and Death; (life 15 times, death 6 times); Truth and lies; (truth 9 times, liar 5 times, lie 4 times); Spirit of truth and spirit of falsehood (Spirit 7 times; spirit 6 times); Children of God and children of the devil (3:10).

*Purpose of our Study*

We want to know who Jesus is, discern the truth from lies, and to have genuine fellowship with God the Father, the Son and one another. Then we can have true joy and love and live victorious lives.

*Outline*

1. The Incarnation of the Word of Life for Fellowship with Us (1:1-4)
   1. The Word of life: we have heard, seen and touched (1-2)
   2. Our fellowship with the Father and the Son (3-4)
2. God is Light (1:5-2:2)
   1. Walking in the darkness; walking in the light (1:5-7)
   2. Claiming to be without sin; confessing our sins (8-10)
   3. We have an advocate--Jesus Christ (2:1-2)
3. To know him is to obey his command of love (3-17)
   1. Obedience: the proof of knowing him (3-6)
   2. The new command; the true light shines (7-8)
   3. Love--live in the light; hate--live in the darkness (9-11)
   4. Reasons for writing: affirmation of their spiritual state (12-14)
   5. Do not love the world (15-17)
4. Warning against the antichrist (2:18-27)
   1. Antichrists deny the truth that Jesus is the Christ (18-19;22-23)
   2. The anointed uphold the truth (20-21;24-27)
5. Children of God (2:28-3:10)
   1. Those born of God continue in Jesus, doing right (2:28-29)
   2. The lavish love of God and the blessings of his children (3:1-3)
   3. Children of God do not continue to sin (4-10)
6. Love one another (3:11-24)
   1. Do not be like Cain (11-15)
   2. Love with actions and in truth (16-18)
   3. The one who keeps God’s command lives in Jesus (19-24)
7. Test the Spirits (4:1-6)
   1. The Spirit of God acknowledges Jesus came in the flesh (1-3)
   2. Whoever knows God listens to us (4-6)
8. God is love (4:7-5:12)
   1. Those born of God can love one another (4:7-8)
   2. God loved first, giving Jesus, that we love one another (9-12)
   3. God’s love is made complete in loving one another (13-21)
   4. Loving God is loving the children of God (5:1-3)
   5. Faith is the victory that overcomes the world (4-5)
   6. God’s testimony about his Son, who gives us eternal life (6-12)
9. Concluding remarks (5:13-21)
   1. Confidence in prayer (13-15)
   2. John’s prayer topics (16-17)
   3. Those born of God do not continue to sin (18)
   4. Jesus is the true God and eternal life (19-21)