

1 JOHN: THE BOOK OF FELLOWSHIP

An Overview

The book of 1 John is the most black and white, down and dirty book in the entire Bible. The apostle John does not hesitate to “call it like it is” or even “put his readers in their place” when he deems it necessary (1:6, 8; 2:4, 15, 22-23; 3:6-9, 10-12). You can imagine that this can make for an uncomfortable and convicting book.

The Holy Spirit used the apostle John to give us the gospel of John, three epistles, and the book of Revelation. These five works complement each other and give us a complete picture of the Christian life.

The Gospel of John	1-3 John	Revelation
Salvation	Sanctification	Glorification
Past history	Present experience	Future hope
Christ died for us	Christ lives in us	Christ comes for us
The Word made flesh	The Word made real in us	The Word conquering

The Confusion

Contrary to what many have suggested, 1 John is NOT a book of “tests” that will determine whether a person is saved or not. As the above chart shows, that is not the purpose of the book. Besides, John would be repeating himself by addressing previous information. The apostle John was well rounded in his capacity to write. In the gospel of John, he wrote evangelistically; in his three letters, he wrote practically; in his final book Revelation, he wrote prophetically. In each of these five books, John’s purpose was extraordinarily unique.¹ Therefore, we can count on the book of 1 John being different from all the others.

The Theme and Purpose(s)

The theme of the book of 1 John is fellowship. John’s primary purpose in writing this book is found in 1:3: “what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ.” John’s goal was not the conversion of his readers, for he was convinced they were already saved (2:12-14). But, being a mature Christian, John knew that his readers needed this letter if they were to enjoy real fellowship and intimacy with God the Father, and His Son, Jesus Christ. This letter served as a means of disciplining these believers in a life of intimacy and obedience.

Interestingly, John states four more purposes in addition to his most significant one (fellowship).

- (1) *That we might have joy* (1:4). The word “joy” (*chara*) is used only here, but the blessing of joy is seen throughout the entire letter. Joy is the result of a close fellowship with Christ.
- (2) *That we might not sin* (2:1-2). The penalty of sin is forgiven, forgotten, forever when a sinner trusts Christ, but the power of sin over the daily life is another matter all together. 1 John explains how we may have victory over sin and how we may gain fellowship forgiveness when we do sin.
- (3) *That we might overcome error* (2:26). John was facing the false teaching of his day just as we face false teachers today (2 Peter 2).
- (4) *That we might have assurance* (5:13). Again, these are not tests of whether you or anyone else is truly born-again. That matter is determined by belief in Jesus Christ. And besides, God is the ultimate Judge who will determine an individual’s eternal state. John simply does not want to close his book without clarifying the gospel one more time (5:9-12), so that his readers can have total assurance that they are on their way to heaven (see also John 5:24).

The Conclusion

John's purpose in writing these believers is clear: He is not writing to test their salvation; he is writing that his "joy may be complete" (1:4). His joy was present; it had begun because they had been born-again. But he wants to complete this joy by seeing them walk in fellowship. In 3 John 4, John writes, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth."

We can also have joy when we experience what it means to be in fellowship with the Father and His Son. Fellowship is simply another word for discipleship. Although salvation is a free gift through the work of Christ, "fellowship," is costly and requires us to cultivate intimacy with Christ.

A number of false teachers had arisen in the churches of that area. The exact form of the heresy facing these Christians is difficult to determine, but from the content of 1 John it involved denial of the reality of the incarnation and a claim that sinful behavior did not hinder fellowship with God. John uses strong terms to describe these men, showing that they were not true Christians who merely had different opinions on some minor matters. He calls them "false prophets" (4:1), "antichrists" (2:18, 22; 4:3; 2 John 7), "liars" (2:22), and "deceivers" (2 John 7; 1 John 2:26 [verb]). He repeatedly implies or states that they are not of God (4:6), but are from the devil (3:8, 10); they are from the world (4:5); and, they do not know God (3:6; 4:6). Their purpose was to deceive the Christians on important matters of doctrine and practice. He states (2:26), "These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you" (see also 2 John 7). They had at one time been in the church, but they had left to form their own churches, based on their supposedly "enlightened" view of things. John writes (2:19), "They went out from us, but they were not really of us; for if they had been of us, they would have remained with us; but they went out, so that it would be shown that they all are not of us."

Probably they had taken a number of church members with them and they were actively recruiting from those who had not left with them. They probably said, "We used to believe just as you do, but we've moved to something better. We have deeper knowledge than we used to have. Come and check it out!" Whenever that sort of thing happens, it creates a lot of confusion and disruption in the church. Those who remain in the church begin to wonder, "Could those people be right? Am I missing something? How can we know that we're right?" Those who leave are critical of the church leaders and point out imperfections in the church. Those who stay behind begin to notice these flaws. Pretty soon, the entire church is engulfed in turmoil.

TITLE: Although the apostle John's name is not found in this book, it was given the title *Ioannou A*, "First of John."

AUTHOR: From its very early history the church believed the apostle John wrote 1 John. Several ancient writers referred to this book as John's writing.² Though modern critics have challenged this view they have not destroyed it. From the standpoint of internal evidence, there are some stylistic differences from the gospel of John, but these can be attributed to the differences between an epistle and a gospel. Further, many similarities exist by way of key words ("abide") or contrasting figures like "righteousness and sin," "light and darkness," "life and death," "love and hate," and "truth and error."³ In addition, the writer was one of the original witnesses of the Savior who knew Him intimately (1:1-4).

DATE/SETTING: It is difficult to precisely date this and the other epistles of John, but since many of the themes and words are so similar to the gospel of John, it is reasonable to assume it was written after the gospel. It was undoubtedly written after the gospel but before the persecutions of Domitian in A.D. 95. I agree with the consensus of scholars that the apostle John wrote 1 John late in his life (A.D. 90-95).⁴ The antagonists are unsaved individuals explicitly denying that Jesus was/is the Christ (2:22-23). Rather, they claim to have fellowship with the Father apart from Christ (1:6). In so doing, they contend that access to the Father and to eternal life may be achieved by works.

AUDIENCE: According to early church tradition John ministered in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, for many years after he left Palestine. We know that he knew the churches and Christians in that Roman province well from Revelation 2 and 3. Perhaps his readers lived in that province. It is also possible that 1 John was a circular letter to be circulated among several churches. John's readers are undoubtedly saved individuals. They are regularly referred to as "little children" (2:1, 18, 28; 3:7, 18; 5:21), "beloved" (3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11), they are cleansed from their sins (1:7; 4:10), and they have eternal life (5:11-13).

PURPOSE: To emphasize the importance of maintaining fellowship with God and holding fast to apostolic doctrine.

THEME: Fellowship with God and others promotes true joy (1:3-4). John wrote to define the nature of fellowship with God whom he describes as *light, love, and life*. God is light (1:5), God is love (4:8, 16), and God is life (see 1:1-2; 5:11-13). To walk in fellowship with God, then, means to walk in the light which leads to experiencing His life, His love for others, and His righteousness.

KEY WORDS: The key concept is fellowship as expressed in the terms fellowship "fellowship" (*koinonia* 1:3 [twice], 6, 7). (1:3, 6, 7), and abide, abiding, etc. (2:6, 10, 14, 17, 27, 28; 3:6, 9, 14, 15, 17, 24; 4:12, 13, 15, 16). Other key words are righteous, righteousness, light, darkness, and sin and lawlessness. Additionally, several words related to being certain or confident are frequently repeated as well. The Greek verb *ginosko* that means, "to know by observation and experience" occurs 15 times and the word *oida* meaning, "to know by reflection" is used 25 times. The verb *phaneroo*, "to make known" is used nine times (and the noun once), and the noun *parresia*, "confidence" is used four times. John wants us to know some things with certainty!

KEY PHRASE: "" (six times).

KEY VERSES:

1 John 1:3-4: "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete."

1 John 5:11-13: “And the testimony is this, that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has the life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have the life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

KEY NOTE: There is an abundance of antithetical parallelism: light vs. darkness, truth vs. falsehood, love vs. hatred, love of the world vs. love of the Father, Christ vs. antichrists, children of God vs. children of the devil, righteousness vs. sin, the Spirit of God vs. the spirit of the Antichrist, and life vs. death.

KEY LESSON: True love tells the truth. Even though 1 John is characterized by its authoritative declaration of truth and stern denunciation of error, a spirit of love prevails.

CHRIST IN 1 JOHN: The present ministry of Christ is portrayed in this epistle (1:5-2:22). His blood continually cleanses the believer from all sin (1:9), and He is our righteous Advocate before the Father (2:1). The epistle places particular stress on the Incarnation of God the Son and the identity of Jesus as the Christ (2:22; 4:2-3), and that He is coming again when we shall see Him and be like Him (2:28-3:3).

STRUCTURE:

NUTSHELL OUTLINE:

“I have never read a book written in simpler words than this one, and yet the words are inexpressible.”

Martin Luther

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Notes

¹ It should be recognized that these broad categorizations are not as neat and clean as they first appear. The major thrust of the gospel of John is relationship (John 1-12 and 18-21); but a secondary theme is fellowship (John 13-17). In 1 John, the major thrust is fellowship, although there are secondary issues which deal with relationship (1 John 5:5-13). See also John Niemelä, "Finding True North in 1 John," *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* Vol 6, No. 3 (July-September 2000): http://www.chafer.edu/journal/back_issues.html.

² E.g., Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian.

³ There are many similar expressions and phrases: compare 1 John 1:1 with John 1:1, 14; 1:4 with John 16:24; 1:6-7 with John 3:19-21; and 4:9 with John 1:14, 18; 3:36.

⁴ E.g., F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*. (London: Pickering & Inglis Ltd., 1970; reprint ed., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986), 31; Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John* WBC series (Waco: Word, 1984), xxii, xxxii; Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes* 4th ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1966), xxx-xxxii. It should be noted that excellent biblical scholars hold that 1 John was written in Jerusalem and has a date of A.D. 60-65. See Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John: Walking in the Light of God's Love* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 24-28.