

1 John - Introduction & Background

Authorship

Although 1 John is an anonymous letter, both external and internal evidence indicates that the Apostle John wrote the book. Two important pieces of *external* evidence include the testimonies of Polycarp and Irenaeus. These sources are important because Polycarp was discipled by John and Irenaeus was discipled by Polycarp. Other pieces of external evidence favoring Johannine authorship include Papias, Origen, Cyprian, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Eusebius. In fact, "All the Greek and Latin church fathers accepted this epistle as Johannine."

Internal evidence also favors the Apostle John as the book's author. Conservatives believe that John wrote the Gospel of John. Similarities exist between the two books. Such similarities include vocabulary, thought phrases, and styles of writing. A number of words are common to both works, such as Father, Son, Spirit, beginning, Word, believe, life, keep, light, commandment, love, abide, and *paraclete*. A number of phrases are common to both such as "to do truth" (1:6; John 3:21), "to walk in darkness" (2:11; John 8:12), "children of God" (3:2; John 11:52), "to be born of God" (3:9; John 1:13), "children of the devil" (3:10; John 8:44), "to pass from death to life" (3:14; John 5:24), "the Spirit of truth" (4:6; John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13), "the only begotten Son" (4:9; John 3:16, 18), "no man has ever seen God" (4:12; John 1:18), "the Savior of the world" (4:14; John 4:42), and "the water and the blood" (5:6; John 19:34). Both books also make use of vivid contrasts. The opening verse in both books identifies Christ as the Word. The writer of both books also identifies himself as an eyewitness to both the pre cross and post resurrection ministry of Christ (1 John 1:1-3; 4:14; John 19:34-35).

The writer also claims to be a conduit of divine information (1:3; 4:6). Such a claim seems out of place if the book was penned under apostolic authority. Perhaps the reason that John does not mention his name is that he was already so well known as the bishop of the churches of Asia Minor (Rev 2-3), that specific mention of his name would have been redundant. Many critical scholars presume the Apostle John did not write the letter because of a statement Eusebius made in his *Ecclesiastical History* (323 BC). In this statement, Eusebius interprets Papias as indicating that there were two Johns and John the Elder rather than the Apostle John wrote the epistle. However, it is also possible to construe Papias' statement as indicating that elder and apostle were different ways of describing the same John.

Date

Some believe that the letter was written early (60–65 AD). They conclude that if the false teachers had departed from Jerusalem (2:19), the letter must have been written before Jerusalem was destroyed in 70 AD. Because of the similarities between John's Gospel and epistle, proponents of the early date also claim that these books were written around the same time. The internal evidence for an early date of John's Gospel includes the present tense reference to the sheep gate in Jerusalem (5:2), the present fear of Roman intervention (11:48), and the lack of any mention of the destruction of the temple in 70 AD. Thus, if John's Gospel was written early, the epistle must have been written early as well. However, the arguments for a late date (85–95 AD) seem stronger. Because tradition indicates that John was bishop over the churches in Asia Minor toward the end of his life, it is likely that John addressed these churches through his letter at this time. The Book of Revelation also alludes to John's supervisory role over the churches in Asia Minor (Rev 2–3). Thus, John probably wrote his letter around the same time he penned the *Apocalypse*. The evidence for a late date for Revelation is much stronger than the arguments for an early date. Because the letter fails to mention persecution and because such persecution broke out toward the end of Domitian's reign, the letter probably should not be dated beyond 95 AD.

John probably wrote his Gospel first since it had the foundational purpose of evangelizing the lost (John 20:31). The epistles were probably written next since their purpose was to edify those who had been evangelized. Because the epistles presume the foundational knowledge already laid in the Gospel, it is logical to conclude that they were written after the Gospel. Revelation was probably written last because of its thematic contribution as the capstone of God's redemptive program. Also, Revelation was written after the epistles since the letters make no mention of persecution that broke out at the end of Domitian's reign and Revelation seems to allude to such persecution.

Occasion for Writing

The occasion for the writing of 1 John probably had to do with incipient Gnosticism's⁴ increasing influence over the churches that were under John's supervision. Thus, an understanding of incipient Gnosticism is critical toward understanding the content of 1 John. The name "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word *ginosko*, which means, "to know." Gnostics taught that special knowledge was not available to all Christians. Rather, it was only available to a select few who submitted themselves to Gnostic teachers. The belief that they had "special knowledge" that others did not possess affected their *ecclesiology*. It fostered an attitude of elitism and exclusivism. It even engendered hatred for common Christians as well as reluctance to fellowship with those of inferior understanding. The belief that they possessed "special knowledge" also affected their *Soteriology*. It created "salvation by knowledge" or the idea that the world could be overcome through intellectual attainment.

In addition to “special knowledge,” incipient Gnosticism also taught dualism. According to this worldview, the physical world was bad and the spiritual world was good.⁵ Dualism had a profound impact on *Christology*. If the presupposition is granted that the physical world is bad, then the notion of God becoming a man (or the hypostatic union) is untenable. Doctrines invented by dualism advocates in order to circumvent the hypostatic union included Doceticism and Cerinthianism. Doceticism comes from the Greek word *dokew*, which means, “to seem” or “to appear.” According to Doceticism, Christ never actually had a body but only appeared to have a body. Cerinthianism was named after its founder Cerinthus, who was a contemporary of John. According to Cerinthianism, Jesus was not God or the Christ. Rather the spirit of Christ merely came upon Him at His baptism and left Him prior to His crucifixion. Thus, Jesus was a mere theophany of Christophany. According to Cerinthianism, Jesus was naturally born of Joseph and Mary.

In addition to tampering with Christology, dualism also negatively effected *anthropology*. If matter is truly evil then spirituality consists of rising above the physical world. This assumption led to two extremes. The first was asceticism, which involved abstaining from the pleasures of the physical world. The second was license. Because it was believed that nothing could be done about the physical world being evil, then it was acceptable to indulge the fleshly appetites. If matter was hopelessly evil, then responsibility for lax morals could be passed off as “I am not doing evil. Rather, it is my body that is doing evil.” If a person could deny responsibility for sin in this manner, then he could also deny that he even possessed a sin nature. License was also promoted by the Gnostic belief that they possessed a “special knowledge.” Such elitism made Gnostics believe that they were above normal standards of right and wrong.

Place of Writing and Destination

According to Irenaeus, John lived out his latter years in Ephesus as an overseer of the churches in that region (Rev 2–3). Thus, many believe that John wrote the epistle from Ephesus. The heretical ideas that John confronts in the letter were prominent in that region. For example, Cerinthus lived in Roman Asia. According to Irenaeus, John came into conflict with Cerinthus in Ephesus. Both Cerinthianism and Doceticism were prevalent in Asia Minor.

No specific audience or church is mentioned as the letter’s recipients. However, most believe that the letter was intended as a circular letter to the various churches in the Roman province of Asia Minor that John was responsible for (Rev 2–3). This view is backed by external tradition, the fact that the Gnostic influences spoken of in the letter were dominant in Asia Minor, and “earlier known use of 1 John comes from this area.”

Audience

The letter was written to a believing audience. This fact becomes obvious simply by noting how John describes his audience. He refers to them as those who have had their sins

forgiven, are known by God, have overcome the evil one, have the Word of God living within them (2:12-14), know the truth (2:21), and have the Spirit's anointing (2:20, 27). He also calls them children of God (2:1,18,28; 3:2,7,18; 5:21), those who will be like Him (3:1-2), my brothers (3:13), beloved ones in the faith (3:2,21; 4:1,7,11), those born of God (4:4), and those possessing the Spirit (4:13). Interestingly, when he warns them, he does so by warning them of a loss of reward (2:28, 2 John 8) and joy (1 John 1:4; 2 John 12) rather than threatening them with eternal retribution. Since genuine believers cannot lose their salvation (John 10:28-30; Rom 8:31-39), the writer is addressing genuine Christians throughout this letter.

Purpose and Message

Understanding that John is addressing a believing audience directly impacts one's understanding of the *purpose* of the letter. The epistle imposes a variety of tests. These tests include experiencing fellowship with God and others (1:3-4), sensitivity to sin (1:5-8), forgiveness (1:9), and commandment keeping (2:3, 5). They also involve doing God's will (2:17), doing righteousness (2:29), looking forward to Christ's return (3:1-3), abstention from habitual sin (3:9), loving the brethren (3:14), freedom from moral guilt (3:21), experiencing answered prayers (3:22), having the Spirit's inner witness (3:24), hearing God's truth in man's messages (4:5-6), loving God (4:19), believing in Christ (5:1), and believing God's record (5:10-11).

There are two views regarding how to interpret these tests. The first view is the *test of life* view. According to this view, these tests determine if a person is saved. They reveal if a person has union with God. The second view is the *test of fellowship* view. In other words, these tests determine if a saved person is walking in fellowship with God. They reveal if a person has communion with God. In both cases, the basic test is righteous conduct and love. The differences between these two views can be summarized as follows:

	Test of Life View	Test of Fellowship View
Summary	If you have righteous conduct, love, and truth, then you know you are saved.	If you have righteous conduct, love, and truth, then you know you are in fellowship with God.
Purpose Statement	1 John 5: 13, “so that you may know that you have eternal life.”	1 John 1:3, “so that you also may have fellowship with us (and) with the Father and with His Son.”
Fellowship, Abiding	Being saved, being in union with God (in Christ)	Being in communion with God (walking in the Spirit)
Knowing God	Possessing eternal life	Enjoying fellowship with God
Eternal life	Salvation (as in John 17:3)	Quality of life (as in John 10: 10)
Light or Darkness	Being saved or being lost	Being in fellowship with God or being out of fellowship

Because, as previously described, John’s audience is already a believing audience, the test of fellowship view is the best view. The regenerated status of the letter’s recipients is presumed throughout the letter and never questioned. Thus, the test of fellowship will be followed in this argument. Therefore, while the Gospel of John was written for the purpose of imparting life to the unsaved (John 20:31), the Epistle of John was written so that saved people could know how to experience deeper fellowship with God (1:1-3; 5:13). John knows that such communion with God will enhance his audience’s joy (1:4).

John not only provides tests in order to enhance his believing audience’s joy and fellowship with God, but he also does so by refuting incipient Gnosticism’s negative impact upon the Christian understanding of Soteriology, anthropology, ecclesiology, and Christology. John understands that if Christian truth is filtered through a Gnostic grid, it will injure the believer’s fellowship with God. Thus, the *message* of the book is that believers can be assured of fellowship with God and also joy as they pass the tests of love and

righteousness and resist the allurements of Gnostic anthropology, Soteriology, ecclesiology, and Christology.

Sub Purposes

In addition to this overarching purpose, John wrote with several sub purposes in mind. John wanted to present Christ's incarnation (1:1-4), to explain the believer's relationship to sin (1:5—2:6), to emphasize love for the brethren (2:7-11; 4:7-12), to warn of worldliness (2:12-17), to warn of false teachers (2:18-29), to encourage moral purity (3:1-12), to present tests evidencing fellowship with God (3:13-24), to demonstrate how to distinguish truth from error (4:1-6), to establish the results of faith in Christ (5:1-12), and to offer assurance of fellowship with God (5:13-21). Four major purposes of the book seem to be introduced with the phrase "these things we write to you." They include the exhortation to fellowship with God and thus experience joy (1:1-4), the admonition to sin less (2:1), warning against heresy (2:26), and the assurance of eternal life (5:13).

Unique Characteristics

John's first letter boasts several outstanding characteristics. First, the letter does not move from one subject to another. "John's literary style is cyclical; he introduced several themes, left them, and then returned to them, often more than once, rather than proceeding in a straight line in his argumentation." Thus, the book is difficult to outline. Second, 1 John nicely complements John's Gospel. While John wrote his gospel to evangelize the lost (20:31), his epistle helps those that have already been saved to experience greater fellowship with God (1 John 1:1-4). Third, the letter complements the Upper Room Discourse (John 13-17). While this discourse gives the positive side regarding what a Christian must do to remain in fellowship with Christ by abiding in Him (John 15), the epistle gives the negative side of the equation by explaining to believers that they must confess their sins in order to remain in fellowship with God. Fourth, the letter presumes a base of knowledge that John had already unfolded earlier in his Gospel.

Fifth, the letter contains no greeting and salutation or conclusion and benediction. It also lacks other elements typically found in an epistle, such as author identification and references to persons, places and events. Sixth, the letter makes use of numerous synonyms. Seventh, 1 John stresses assurance. The words *ginosko* and *oida* occur repeatedly throughout the book. The reference to certainty (5:13), or similar phraseology, occurs 5x in the letter. John wants his readers to develop assurance based upon their communion with God. While the Gospel was written to impart life (20:31), the epistle seems to have been written to provide assurance of life by teaching believers how to deepen their fellowship with God (5:13). Eighth, the letter stresses love. The word "love" is found 35x in the epistle.

Ninth, like the Gospel of John, the letter is characterized by simplicity of style. Tenth, the letter contains a significant passage on worldliness (2:15-17). Some believe that all human

sin can be itemized based upon the categories found in this passage (Gen 3:6; Matt 4:1-11). Eleventh, the letter contains no OT quotations and only alludes to one Old Testament story (3:12). Twelfth, the letter makes use of numerous contrasts (light and darkness, flesh and spirit, life and death, God and Satan, truth and falsehood, Christ and antichrist, love and hatred, love of the world and love of God). Thus, for John it seems that fellowship with God is something that is rather "black and white." Either one lives in fellowship with God or he does not.

Thirteenth, John emphasizes proper Christology as the basis for fellowship with God.

Fourteenth, although having background information is helpful in understanding other biblical books, this is especially true with 1 John. Without some sort of pre-understanding regarding incipient Gnosticism, many of the books statements will go unappreciated.

Fifteenth, the letter focuses upon fellowship with God. "Abide" appears 24x in 1 John, more than any other letter.

Method of Communication

The letter uses two methods of communication. The first method is didactic. John's method is to teach by contrast. He routinely contrasts good and bad doctrine (2:21-23; 4:2-3,14; 5:10) and lifestyles (2:9-11; 3:6-10,15; 4:6,16; John 10:4-5). The second method is polemical. John issues various warnings in order to deter ungodly behavior (2:28; 3:8,14-15).

Genre

Although the dominant genre of the letter is epistolary, most would categorize it further as an "epistolary sermon." In other words, it is a homily. The material found within the letter would have been a sermon if John had addressed his audience directly. However, geographic considerations made this impossible. Thus, John's sermon took the form of an epistle. In this regard, the letter seems to be similar to James, Hebrews, and Jude.

Outline

I. Reality of Christ's incarnation (1 John 1:1-4)

(1) Subject: Incarnated Christ (1:1-2)

(2) Purpose: (1:3-4)

(A) Fellowship (1:3)

(a) With apostles (1:3a)

(b) With Christ (1:3b)

(B) Joy (1:4)

II. Relationship of the believer to sin (1 John 1:5—2:6)

(1) No moral darkness in God (1:5)

(2) Believers' relation toward sin and God outlined in five conditional sentences (1:6-10)

(A) If we live in sin we cannot have fellowship with God (1:6)

- (B) If we walk in the light we have fellowship with Him (1:7)
 - (C) If we say we have no sin then the truth is not in us (1:8)
 - (D) If we confess our sin Christ cleanses us (1:9)
 - (E) If we say we have no sin then the truth is not in us (1:10)
- (3) We have an Advocate when we do sin (2:1-2)
- (4) Knowing God is evidenced through commandment keeping (2:3-6)
- III. Necessity of loving the brethren (1 John 2:7-11)
 - (1) Old and new commands (2:7-8)
 - (A) Old command (2:7)
 - (B) New command (2:8)
 - (2) Evidence of fellowship with God is a love for the brethren (2:9-11)
- IV. Necessity of not loving the world (1 John 2:12-17)
 - (1) Family commended for past victories (2:12-14)
 - (A) First cycle (2:12-13b)
 - (a) Children: forgiveness (2:12)
 - (b) Fathers: know God (2:13a)
 - (c) Young men: overcome the evil one (2:13b)
 - (B) Second cycle (2:13c-14)
 - (a) Children: know the Father (2:13c)
 - (b) Fathers: know God (2:14a)
 - (c) Young men: strong, word of God lives in you, overcome Satan (2:14b)
 - (2) World system described (2:15-17)
 - (A) Command to not love this world (2:15a)
 - (B) First reason for not loving the world: devaluation of God's love (2:15b)
 - (C) Description of the world (2:16)
 - (a) Lust of the flesh (2:16a)
 - (b) Lust of the eyes (2:16b)
 - (c) Pride of life (2:16c)
 - (D) Second reason for not loving the world: the world is temporary (2:17)
- V. Warnings against false teachers (1 John 2:18-29)
 - (1) Antichrists described (2:18-23)
 - (A) Antichrist versus Antichrists (2:18)
 - (B) Antichrists identified through apostasy (2:19)
 - (C) Antichrists identified through unsound doctrine (2:20-23)
 - (a) They contradicted the truth (2:20-21)
 - (b) They deny Christ as Messiah (2:22-23)
 - (2) Antidote for the Antichrists: abide in the truth (2:24-29)
 - (A) Abide in the truth (2:24-26)

(B) Receive the Spirit's illuminating ministry (2:27)

(C) Incentives to abide in the truth (2:28-29)

(a) The incentive of His coming (2:28)

(b) Incentive of the believer's identity (2:29)

VI. Exhortation to moral purity (1 John 3:1-12)

(1) Belief and love of Christ's coming produces moral purity (3:1-3)

(2) Those in fellowship with God sin less (3:4-6)

(A) Definition of sin (3:4)

(B) Christ came to remove sin (3:5)

(C) Those in fellowship with Him sin less (3:6)

(3) Children of Satan and those in fellowship contrasted (3:7-12)

(A) Those in fellowship with God do right (3:7)

(B) Children of Satan do evil (3:8)

(C) Those in fellowship with God cannot engage in continual sin (3:9-10)

(D) Exhortation to avoid the loveless, Satanic example of Cain (3:11-12)

(a) Exhortation to love (3:11)

(b) Cain's Satanic, loveless example (3:12)

VII. Tests of fellowship (1 John 3:13-24)

(1) Hatred from the world (3:13)

(2) Love of the brethren (3:14-15)

(3) Love described (3:16-18)

(A) Christ's example (3:16)

(B) Purpose of prosperity (3:17)

(C) Love must be practiced (3:18)

(4) No internal condemnation (3:19-21)

(5) Answered prayer (3:22a)

(6) Obedience (3:22b-24a)

(7) Spirit's presence (3:24b)

VIII. Necessity of distinguishing truth from error (1 John 4:1-6)

(1) The necessity of testing the spirits (4:1)

(2) How to distinguish Christ from the Antichrist (4:2-3)

(A) Christ (4:2)

(B) Antichrist (4:3)

(3) Every born-again person has already overcome Antichrist (4:4)

(4) How to distinguish Christ from Antichrist (4:5-6)

(A) Antichrist: worldly viewpoint (4:5)

(B) Christ: heavenly viewpoint (4:6)

IX. Necessity of loving the brethren reiterated (1 John 4:7-12)

- (1) Love demonstrates belonging to God (4:7-8)
- (2) God's example of love (4:9-10)
- (3) Believers should follow Christ's example of love (4:11-12)

X. Tests of fellowship reiterated (1 John 4:13-21)

- (1) Presence of the Spirit (4:13)
- (2) Acknowledgment that Christ is the Son of God (4:14-15)
- (3) Exhibiting the love of God (4:16)
- (4) No fear of judgment (4:17-18)
- (5) Loving the brethren (4:19-21)

XI. Results of fellowship (1 John 5:1-12)

- (1) Faith, love of God and the brethren, obedience (5:1-3)
- (2) The believer's overcoming faith in Christ (5:4-5)
- (3) The continuing object of faith must be the true Christ (5:6-9)
 - (A) Witness of the water and blood (5:6-7)
 - (B) Witness of the Spirit (5:8)
 - (C) Witness of God (5:9)
- (4) He who believes in this testimony has life (5:10-12)

XII. Assurances of fellowship (1 John 5:13-20)

- (1) Exhortation to be assured of life (5:13)
- (2) Assurance of life gained through answered prayer in the will of God (5:14-17)
 - (A) General assurance of answered prayer (5:14-15)
 - (B) Examples of effective intercessory prayer (5:16-17)
 - (a) Prayer for a brother involved in a sin that does not lead to death (5:16a)
 - (b) Prayer for a brother involved in a sin that does lead to death (5:16b-17)
- (3) The believer's three certainties (5:18-20)
 - (A) Sin is a threat to the believer's fellowship and should be abstained from (5:18)
 - (B) Believers stand against the Satanic world system (5:19)
 - (C) True knowledge of the incarnation allows the believer to experience communion with God (5:20)

XIII. Concluding exhortation to abstain from idolatry (1 John 5:21)