

THE EPISTLES OF 1, 2, & 3 JOHN
RWANDAN PASTOR'S CONFERENCE
SESSION I
BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT FOR
1 JOHN AND PROLOGUE

As we begin this week of study together, it is my sincere hope and prayer that God will grant us the wisdom to learn together as we study His word. I would hope that we each grow spiritually in our walk with Him and develop new friendships and relationships as brothers in Christ. Finally, I would pray that we each glean from this study in order that we might use it in our daily ministry as we share the gospel of Jesus Christ and minister to those around us. Let us be ever-mindful of the message of Proverbs 27:17

As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another.

BACKGROUND & CONTEXT OF 1 JOHN

First John is one of the most beloved books of the New Testament. It is among the most widely read and often preached from books. Likewise, the books of 2 and 3 John are among the most often skipped, and widely ignored books of the New Testament. Likely this is due to their brevity. Yet, we will see over the course of this week, that each of these letters has much to offer and complement each other toward an overall effort that the writer intended.

We will begin with 1 John. This small book is packed with both theological significance and great pastoral advice. Within these five short chapters the writer deals quite strongly with early heresies arising within the Church. His treatment in that regard is swift, decisive, and instructive for us today. Yet also packed within the text is a balance of pastoral advice to the true followers of Jesus in their moral obligations as Christians and also to fortify their assurance of salvation which was being sorely tested by the heretical teachers within their midst.

Authorship:

Who wrote 1 John? Tradition has long ascribed the authorship of this book to the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee. Yet nowhere in the text does John name himself, or even use the familiar title "*the disciple whom Jesus loved*". In order to examine the question of authorship, it is appropriate to look at evidence within Scripture and outside of Scripture. We refer to this as *internal* and *external* evidence, respectively.

Internal Evidence:

Our time here will focus greatly on the relationship of 1 John to the Gospel of John. When we get to 2 and 3 John, we will focus on their relationship to 1 John. This process will help us to better understand authorship evidence from within Scripture itself.

Read the first three verses of 1 John and tell me what stands out to you?

1. The writer is stressing personal contact with Jesus. The author is claiming to have been a direct eyewitness to Jesus' earthly ministry. The sense conveyed is that of one who was deeply and personally connected to the Lord. Notice that in the space of these three verses, there are six points where he claims to have personally seen, heard, and touched *the word of life*.
2. Another point to notice is the tone of the writer throughout the text. As we study 1 John, we are going to witness a writer who writes with a tone of authority. There is nothing weak or timid about this book. You will notice the direct nature the writer takes in the "I – you" passages like 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 26. Such a tone of direct authority is best fitting one who personally walked with Jesus.
3. Next, we will notice that there is striking similarity between 1 John and the Gospel of John in relation to their *theology, vocabulary, and word structure*.
 - The term *parakletos* (*Advocate*) occurs only five times in Scripture, all of which are in the Johannine corpus: John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 John 2:1.
 - The term *monogenes* (*only, unique*) as an expression of the Son's unique relationship to the Father occurs only in John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18 and 1 John 4:9In addition to this, below are some examples taken from the New American Commentary which illustrate the common salvation theme which extends between 1 John and the Gospel of John:¹
 - In our unredeemed state we are "of the devil," who has sinned and lied and murdered "from the beginning " (I John 3:8 / John 8:44); we are "from the world" (1 John 2:16; 4:5 / John 8:23; 15:19). We therefore "sin" (1 John 3:4 / John 8:34)

and "have" sin (1 John 1:8 / John 9:41), "walk in the darkness" (1 John 1:6; 2:11/ John 8:12; 12:35) and are "dead" (1 John 3:14 / John 5:25).

- God loved and sent His Son to be "the Savior of the World" (1 John 4:14 / John 4:42) so that "we might live" (1 John 4:9 / John 3:16). Believing in him or in his "name" (1 John 5:13 / John 1:12), we pass from death to life (1 John 3:14 / John 5:24). We "have life" (1 John 5:11,12 / John 3:15, 36; 20:31), for life is in the Son of God (1 John 5:11-12 / John 1:4; 14:6). This is what it means to be "born of God" (1 John 2:29; 3:9; 5:4,18 / John 1:13).

When we consider the weight of the internal evidence, there is no reason to doubt that the writer of 1 John was an eyewitness to the Lord Jesus, and that he was also the writer of the Gospel of John.

Yet the question remains: Who was this eyewitness who claims to have walked so closely with Jesus??

In order to address this question, we will turn now to the external witness of the Early Church Fathers who lived in the years immediately after the first century A.D.

External Evidence:

The early church was absolutely consistent in ascribing the authorship of the Fourth Gospel and the book of 1 John to the Apostle John. Below an example of writings and early Church Fathers which claim the Apostle John was the writer of 1 John:

- **The Didache** – The Teaching of the Twelve, written approximately A.D. 90-120.
- **Clement of Rome** – In 1 Clement, writing in the year A.D. 96
- **The Epistle of Barnabas** – This text was written in the year A.D. 130
- **Polycarp** – Lived in the years immediately following John in the early 2nd century.
- **Papias** – Perhaps the best account of external evidence comes from Papias who was born ca. A.D. 60 and personally knew the Apostle John. He is the first person to make a specific reference to the letters of John as the work of the Apostle John. He wrote about this in his writing *Exposition of the Oracles of the Lord* ca. A.D. 130.
- **Irenaeus** – Only one generation removed from John. Like Papias, also specifically attributes the Gospel of John, 1 John and 2 John to the Apostle John in his writings ca. A.D. 180.

Based upon the strength of ***both*** the internal and external evidence, we will hold with the majority position of Church tradition that the author of 1 John is the same person as the author of the Gospel of John and this man is identified as the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee.

Date & Place of the Writing:

We will not belabor this section long. First of all, there is little to no evidence of the date and place of the writing within the text itself. However, as noted above in the authorship section, there is significant external evidence regarding the Apostle John's later life.

Among this external evidence is that of Irenaeus, who writes in *Against Heresies*, that John spent his later years in the city of Ephesus ministering to the churches of Asia Minor:

“John, the disciple of the Lord, who also leaned upon his breast, did himself publish a Gospel during his residence at Ephesus in Asia.” (3.1.1)

Additionally, Irenaeus wrote:

“,,,remaining among them (the Ephesians) permanently until the time of Trajan.” (3.3.4)

Trajan reigned as Emperor of Rome from A.D. 98-117. This would indicate that the Apostle John died at some point just before the reign of Trajan.² Therefore his writings would have to predate that point.

Based upon this evidence, most scholarship would contend for a date to the Epistles of John sometime between A.D. 85-100 and that they were written while John was in residence at Ephesus.

Occasion / Purpose of the Writing:

Books have been written regarding why John wrote 1 John. Doubtless as many views exist as there are commentaries on the subject. Perhaps this is due to the fact that John wrote in a definitive theological manner, yet at the same time took a very pastoral approach?? Perhaps it is because there seems to be at least four purpose statements within the text itself?? Regardless of the reasons there are differing opinions on specific emphasis points.

However regardless of this, there is much in common within the literature regarding why the Apostle wrote his first epistle. For our study, we are going to keep three elements in mind:

First, we want to understand the *context of the conflict* that was occurring within the churches under John's leadership at the time. Secondly, we want to examine the *four key verses* within the text that allude to the Apostle's purpose. Finally, we want to understand the basics of John's teaching within three key themes of **faith, obedience, and love**. If we strive to understand 1 John within the confines of these three elements, then I think we will do well in comprehending the message of our Lord to us in 1 John.

1. Current Context:

The Apostle is very clear in demonstrating that 1 John is written to a church or group of churches in crisis. These bodies were likely house churches made up of people with whom John knew personally. Yet in at least three places John makes clear that these churches were being attacked by false teaching (cf. 2:18-28; 4:1-6; 5:6-7).³

John provides critical clues as to what the false teachers were teaching in 4:2-3 and 5:6-7, where it appears they are *denying the humanity of Jesus*. We know that this was a common theme amongst the heresy of Gnosticism which would come into full swing in the second century A.D. However, it is very likely and commonly held that John was combatting the earliest forms of this heresy.

Why would a doctrine which denies the humanity of Jesus, in favor of his divinity, be so dangerous??

2. Four Key Verses Which Allude to John's Purpose:

1:3 - that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, *so that you too may have fellowship with us*; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

1:4 - And we are writing these things *so that our joy may be complete*.

2:1 - 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.

5:13 - 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*.

3. Three Themes – Faith, Obedience, and Love:

As we study through this letter, keep in mind John's implied importance on three areas of authentic Christian life:⁴

- A. Life in Christ grows out of ***right belief (faith)***. Yet this life is not complete in faith alone.

- B. The life filled with faith in Jesus Christ leads to a life marked with ***obedient behavior***. Yet once again, the life marked with obedience, combined with right belief is not enough. We all know of those who believe in Christ and work to live obedient lives. Yet in their hearts they are pious or have an air of moral superiority over others.

- C. Because of this, John stresses the final theme: True godliness clearly encompasses the two elements above, but it does so in an environment of deep-rooted devotion toward God. This ***deep love of God*** cannot help but pour forth in ***deep love of those people*** around us as well.

Clearly there has been much to grasp in this section on the occasion and purpose for John's writing. My simple words of advice to you as we prepare to enter the text: Keep in mind that John is dealing with a great challenge to the very churches that he is responsible for. False teachers have infiltrated into these bodies and have wreaked great havoc upon believers who John knew personally. From his time with Jesus, the Apostle knew that such challenges would come, look at Matthew 7:15-20. In addition to this, John understood all too well the theological damage that the message of these false prophets held for the church. As such, he writes in a very dogmatic and authoritative tone so that there is no confusing exactly what his message is regarding these false teachings. Yet, within the realm of this entire backdrop, John is continuously playing the role of the pastor. He is constantly mindful of the need for every believer to possess the proper balance of right belief, obedience to God, and true love for God and those around us.

THE PROLOGUE OF 1 JOHN – 1:1-4:

The time has come for us to get into the material we are here to study. We will close out this first session of our time by looking at the opening four verses of 1 John 1. Let's begin by reading those verses aloud:

Just as we noted in our opening discussions about regarding the authorship of the text, there are striking similarities between this epistle and the Fourth Gospel. The verses demonstrate that fact well. John is much more concise here in the epistle, but I want us to turn back and read from the Gospel of John, 1:1-4, 9-14.

Do you see the similarity between these two openings? John does not name specifically who he is referring to in either writing, but who is the only person that fits this description??

Jesus Christ is the only possible subject of John's writings both in the epistle and the Gospel!!

1:1:

John is not using these familiar phrases because they sounded so good in his Gospel. No! The Apostle is forming his theological argument against the false teachers from his opening sentence. This verse begins "*that which was from the beginning*"; the word "*that*" can also be translated "*a certain one*". In either case, the point of John's message in vs. 1 is two-fold:

1. First, the eternal nature of Jesus Christ. John is establishing that the subject of his eyewitness accounting, Jesus, was in existence "*from the beginning*". Just as in John 1:1, the Apostle is making it clear that before time began, before the universe was set into existence, Jesus "*was*". Like the Hebrew word God used to describe Himself "*I am*", this is the Greek equivalent which tells us that the nature of existence can only be attributed to the Godhead.
2. Secondly, the balance of this verse is dual functional in nature. John is establishing the eyewitness authority of his testimony. He is also making his first theological argument against the false teachers, the physical reality of the incarnation.
 - a. **Eyewitness testimony:** In America, much of the power of this statement has been lost. In my country, we tend to look to science to "prove" whether something is true or not. In our courtrooms, the value of an eyewitness testimony still carries significant weight. In biblical times, there was great power in the testimony of eyewitnesses to an event. Effectively John is testifying to the facts that he and others have personally witnessed.
 - b. **Physical incarnation:** John is clearly demonstrating that he has *heard, seen, and touched* Jesus. He is effectively saying, that there is absolutely no denying the physical presence of the Lord being among us!

Recall our contention is that the false teachers were likely early adherents to Gnosticism. Gnosticism took numerous forms, but usually emphasized the essential goodness of the spirit and the inherent evil or inferiority of all matter. Thus they denied the physical incarnation of Jesus.⁵

1:2-3:

Once again vs. 2 holds a two-fold exhortation of the reality of the physical incarnation of Jesus. In each the opening and closing phrases, John makes clear that Jesus was “*made manifest*”. Yet notice that vs. 3 contains one of the four possible purpose statements of 1 John; *so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ*. The Apostle John had perhaps the closest and most personal relationship with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Now John is stating that one of the main purposes in testifying and proclaiming the gospel message is so that others who believe in Christ can have the same relationship that he has enjoyed!!

1:4:

Again we find one of the potential purpose statements of 1 John. In verse 3 we witnessed the sincere desire of John to testify and proclaim the gospel of Christ in order that others might believe and share in the great personal fellowship with Christ that he has known.

Now in vs. 4 the true pastor’s heart of the Apostle is seen. John wishes for others to experience the fellowship and joy of the relationship that he has known for so many years. The joy John expresses is most likely linked with the love he has for his readers.⁶

ENDNOTES

¹ Daniel L. Akin. *The New American Commentary: vol. 38 1,2,3 John*. Edited by Richard R. Melick Jr., Paige Patterson, Curtis Vaughan. Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2001. 24.

² Ibid. 27.

³ Ibid. 29.

⁴ Robert W. Yarbrough. *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament: 1-3 John*. Edited by Robert Yarbrough and Robert Stein. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Group, 2008. 26-27.

⁵ Akin. 29.

⁶ Yarbrough. 42-43.