

I John: An Overview

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Introduction

The apostle John had a characteristic unique way of writing and thus when one encounters what flowed from his pen, it immediately becomes apparent as was the case in his epistles (e.g. 1 John 1:1-4). John's gospel stands unique among the good news narratives and so do the epistles. The first, second and third epistles by and large carry the divine stamp and show clear evidence in the main that they originated from the apostle's pen. The disciple whom Jesus loved (John 13:23; 21:20) certainly demonstrates in what he writes that he definitely experienced first-hand interaction with the Lord given the depth of insight and unique perspectives brought to the fore (1 John 1:2-4). His abilities to detect error or heresy from afar proves that John intimately knew what was false and could competently write by simple exposure to them and thus speaks both as a reactionary voice as well as prophetic in a sense (1 John 2:18-29; 4:1-6). Although some dispute John the apostle having authored the epistles at hand, one cannot help but realise that the ideas, expressions, thought pattern or approach largely point to him, in addition to external evidence drawn from the assertions, traditions and writings of the Church fathers. John's letters are occasional, whose main writing aim varies from letter to letter but in each case, the apostle expresses what he considers to be marks of a true child of God while prescribing what should obtain in an ideal church or saintly individual. For one thing, none of the three letters inherently claims to have been written by John and thus difficult to ascertain for sure that the apostle actually penned these wonderful classic letters. There is need therefore to go elsewhere to collate evidence. For another thing, all the letters are concerned about walking and retaining fidelity to Truth. The first letter states that the light is aligned to purity while in the second, John expresses delight that his children in the faith had kept walking in the truth (II John) though in the third epistle, this aged servant of Christ demonstrates what it is to work with or against the truth as evidenced by the case studies (i.e. Demetrius & Diotrophes) that he brings to the fore (III John 9-13). Finally, the books all address the issue of ministry in relation to its awful importance to the church then and now. In this paper, our focus is on the first epistle which is slightly longer and in many senses represents the rest in a number of aspects. We highlight its chief contents demonstrating that the epistle is both doctrinal and polemical: combating the heresies of the day.

Author, Primary Target Readership, Place and Date of Authorship

The apostle John most likely wrote this epistle because it carries his signature stamp, thought pattern, expression and characteristic unique style as Hale and others have rightly observed (Hale 640). The themes addressed and manner of expression all point to no other than John the apostle. Both internal and external evidence strongly suggested the apostle whom Jesus loved because of his unique mastery and depth of insight exhibited (1 John 1:1-3). For instance, church tradition holds that John wrote this epistle most probably from Ephesus where he spent the last many years of his life. The writings of the early church fathers suggest that John the apostle was indeed the author not another. Internal evidence also seems to indicate the same author especially the points appearing similar to the gospel. For instance, the prologue in the epistle approximates the approach and style to the gospel and so are other parts of this short but pregnant write up (i.e. 1 John 1:1-3; cf. John 1:1-3). However, some strongly object to this view suggesting other possible writers in the first or second century as Louis Berkhoff and others have rightly observed (Berkhoff 175). The author question is not conclusive though, but worth exploring further. As to the time of writing of this epistle, consensus is not universal but some considerable consensus suggests that the epistle was written after the gospel of John, probably sometime after AD 90 to address certain pertinent issues that the aged apostle's trained eye spotted and addressed (Hale 640; African Bible Commentary; Berkhoff 176). Ephesus could have been the most probable place from which the writer penned the book having either returned from his island of Patmos encounter or shortly before (Hale 640; Berkhoff 176). The primary target would therefore be the saints in Asia Minor or more specifically Ephesus (Berkhoff 175). These churches were largely Gentile in structure although a significant Jewish population could have been present in and around the church context. Thus, he addresses various issues including idolatry (1 John 5:21), heresies (1 John 3) and insidious wrong teaching that tends to poison one's sincere faith in the Lord. The apostle equally highlights several definite pointers to true and false faith as observed in his day and context. John appears to have been a master physician of souls, having been trained by the Lord, mellowing over the many decades as he guided the church across the known world then.

Purpose of Book

The primary purpose of the book is to warn the saint against heresy as well as encourage them towards holiness now that they have eternal life by being practical in an ethical spiritual manner (Hale 640). The apostle is alive to the lingering dangers around though in a veiled seed form which would eventually develop into full blown toxic heresies in subsequent decades and years hence. It appears that Gnosticism, Docetism, Montanism, asceticism and other wrong teachings were not clearly discernible to the untrained theological eye at the time

but the spiritual apostle detected this venom from afar sounding the clear alarm in the process (Hale 640; Berkhoff 175). He does this in several ways by first establishing the truth which would then enable his readers better detect error on their own. The apostle brings along some credentials as well as reminds his readers that his message and command is not really new but must be applied appropriately in each context. Furthermore, John encourages the saints to take their stand against the world by pointing to the anointing in them, their strength from on high and the glorious blessings that accrue to them as a result of Christ's finished work on the cross. The Christian has certain unmistakable traits that include love, orthopraxy and a good transformed inward disposition. Finally, John exhorts the believers to flee from idols in whatever form they may come along (1 John 5:24). Thus, the book is about establishing the truth and exposing error.

Highlighted Themes in the Book

The purpose and themes of the book are varied but John's main point is that the saint should beware of the dangers lurking around them with a potential to make them drift away from the received truth. The apostle also addresses the issue of love, eternal life, idolatry as affects the saint's usefulness and sincere devotion to God (Ryle 151). In writing this epistle, John declares the incarnation and divinity of Christ (1 John 1:1). This is done in graphic but clear terms right from the outset of the book (Warfield 448). One other important issue that John addresses is this whole matter of sin; the concept, nature and effect of this vice (Ryle {Holiness}1). He states that sin is real and affects every child of God regardless and must be treated with meticulous due diligent care lest the saint's garments be spotted or corrupted by toxic sin. In a sense, the author speaks in idealistic terms though is cognisant of the fact that a genuine child of God could fall into sin (though not wilfully so) with a remedy in place brought about by the Son of God (1 John 2:2). Furthermore, the apostle categorically states that a genuine saint will be overwhelmed by the love of God lavished upon them (1 John 3:1-3) with the resultant effect of keeping away from sin and instead living a full and fruitful holy life bringing glory and honour to God. An example of this appreciation of God's grace is the outworking of love towards the brethren (1 John 3) and keeping away from idols (1 John 2:15; 5:24; Warfield 448). Genuine children of God will not entertain sin in their lives but aspire after holiness, which distinguishes them from the unregenerate. In a nutshell, the book highlights that indicators of authentic Christianity while exposing damnable heretical teachings or trends that would soon or later adversely affect the saint. It may further be asserted that a genuine saint is holy and consistently lives an upright life as God enables. This saint has a sensitive conscience departing from evil, walks as Jesus walked abhorring all forms of heretical teaching or contamination, though not from a legalistically ascetic perspective. Contrary to what many believe and hold in this presently decayed post modernistic world about the truth, the genuine saint discerns and bows to God's word while contending for truth in the same breathe.

Perceived Problems with the Book

The authorship of John the apostle has been questioned by some scholars in recent years, but both internal and external evidence strongly points to the apostle. Though the epistle itself does not explicitly state that John wrote the book, the language, structure, form and thinking behind the letter gravitates to John. As one reads the epistle, they cannot help realise that there is a striking similarity in some parts of the first epistle to the gospel. For instance, John 1:1 and 1 John 1:1-2 are strikingly similar and as such, some have even suggested that this epistle could have been derived from the gospel itself or was a preamble of it! Another point of contention is the character displayed in the gospel and the language of love in 1 John. While the John in the gospel appears a rough and somewhat brash personality, the love talk in 1 John appears to point to one who is soft, maturely reasonable and gentle. How do we reconcile these differences, the sceptics ask? Pundits make an issue here but then individuals do not remain the same over the years. Many things change as they grow mellowing over the years as wisdom takes effect. Yet another point of discussion is that the language of 1 John is not exactly the same as that of the gospel in every case. In the epistle, the writer at times uses some unique words and appears to be addressing various issues. The final problem area is the well-developed theology and the issues addressed. The theology in 1 John appears far more refined than that of the gospel though in both books the theology is well articulated. Sceptics have argued that it could not be possible that the same person wrote the gospel and this book given the type of issues he addresses. According to them, some of those problems and heresies only became manifestly problematic in the second century and after (Berkhoff 175). This makes them suggest that another, apart from John authored the book claiming to have been from the hand of the apostle. Could it be a case of a subtle imitation or even pseudonym? That said, Gnosticism, Docetism, Antinomianism, Asceticism and many other heresies are here directly confronted and effectively dealt with.

Lessons Gleaned from the Book

The book of I John is clearly related to the gospel and other letters (i.e. 2 & 3 John) in many ways than one. For one thing, the form, language, approach and style of presentation is similar. In the Johannine unique style, the apostle deals with the very heart of the life and ministry of Christ except that in the latter letters, John zeroes in on aspects that relate to the outworking of faith, though some doctrinal aspects (i.e. Docetism, Gnosticism, the incarnation etc.) are equally addressed. For another thing, and as earlier intimated, the book commences much like the gospel-from eternity (1 John 1:1). This point of departure is uniquely John's and immediately arrests the readers' attention because the concepts brought to the fore are extremely deep. For our take home lessons however, below are some of the pertinent points worth considering:

1. The apostle John is the most likely candidate that wrote the gospel and epistles, in addition to Revelation (though the latter book is highly debated among scholars).
2. The apostle's aim is to both inoculate his readers against heresy as well as educate them on what is right.
3. Internal and external evidence 'smells' Johanine relating to language, form and style.
4. The world, flesh and Devil are a constant danger to the soul and must be carefully handled. Though the Christian is in the world, they are not of it and hence the need to keep themselves from idols (1 John 2:15ff; 5:21).
5. Though some pundits claim that 1 John is probably a second century spurious work combating advanced heresies like Gnosticism, Montanism/Antinomianism or Docetism, this is not the case because the apostle's sensitive eagle trained eye may have spotted the trends from afar and thus wrote to address issues long before they became a menace.
6. Faith in the Son of God is what overcomes the world and ensures that the Christian has victory over sin or its attendant off shoots (1 John 5:4).
7. Christian claims must be buttressed by evidence of acts of love (1 John 3:11-24). It is pointless to therefore claim to be a Child of God if one cannot care for the person they see.
8. A true Christian cannot wilfully and intentionally continue to live in sin in the light of what God has done and deposited in them. Holiness and progressive sanctification is expected of every child of God (1 John 3:9).
9. Though John is idealistic in his approach to statements relating to the saint avoiding sin, he is however cognisant of the fact that the saint may occasionally fall into sin because they are not perfect. Thus, he highlights the antidote against sin as well as the remedy of the advocate (Propitiation and Expiation) that is found in the Lord Jesus Christ (1 John 1:9; 2:1-3). God is very gracious and shows super abundant grace to His children that honestly want to walk in the light, as He is in the light.
10. Anyone that entertains wrong notions about God or His Son has in effect denied the faith and works against the Lord. The Spirit of the antichrist was and is still at work in the world, very dangerous and slippery indeed. The saint must watch against all such manoeuvres, especially in the light

of the ever present and changing forms of Gnosticism even in the present day (1 John 2:18-29).

11. The new birth is a reality as echoed in this epistle. It was first introduced in the gospel (John 3:3-8) but now talked about again in the first epistle though a slightly different set of words is used to mean the same thing – “Born of God” (Free Grace Broadcaster, 15)¹. The new birth is an inward transformation that affects the whole of life as evidenced by one’s inner and outward disposition, behaviour and practice.
12. There are several points suggested and mentioned in the book but not elaborated. The saint is encouraged to try and decipher them. The first is what is meant by “*The world*”, the second is “*The anti-Christ*” and the third is “*The sin that does not lead to death*” which John mentions in near the end of his letter (1 John 5:16-19). Various people have suggested different things as to the nature and identity of these aspects but suffice it to say that the author intends to equip the saint to stand ready to overcome sin’s potency by the aid of the Holy Spirit, whom he gave to every anointed child of God.
13. Idolatry is a very subtle sin which comes in various forms, shapes and sizes. The Christian should therefore be able to detect which type of idol they are dealing with at any given point. Modern idols could include materialism coming across in love for money, fame, family, wealth, jobs, whatever takes the place of God. Historically, many considered idols to be only curved images but the apostle means far much more which the discerning eye will be able to identify and pick out.

Conclusion

The apostle John addresses many pertinent issues in this little but highly loaded book, many of which define who a Christian is and who is not. As JC Ryle has rightly pointed out, these are tests of who a genuine saint really is (Ryle 151). But John does more; he exposes the deadly heresies and errors in his day, though in bud form at the time (Berkhoff 178). In doing this, he proves to be a good minister of Christ whose every word must be heeded. People professing the faith must weigh their claims against this touch stone of scripture failure to which disqualifies them from the prize. Furthermore, they need to flee from idols that not only corrupt their lifestyle but their thinking as well. The restless enemies of their souls namely the world, the flesh and the Devil never for a moment relent but daily step up their assault against the soul. There is therefore need to

¹ The Puritan John Gill (1697-1771) traces the terms used in relation to the new birth in the article “Biblical terms for the New birth”. Dr Peter Masters has roused some controversy as to the actual nature of regeneration and how it takes place but it appears for the Puritans, the matter was by and large settled.

constantly watch for any detour from the truth which the apostles proved, touched and walked with. Faith is what overcomes the world no matter what betide. Our love from to God should never wane or lose focus, as the ancient divines have rightly suggested (Winslow 40-63).

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