

Teaching Outlines for 1, 2 and 3 John

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1 JOHN: ASSURANCE OF SALVATION

Author: John the Apostle

Provenance: 1 John does not identify a place of origin. Because church tradition indicates that John resided in Ephesus for a period of time, it is a likely place of origin as any.

Date: The traditional date of writing is c. A.D. 95/96, but a date around c. A.D. 90-95 is not unreasonable.

Recipients: The epistle does not tell us precisely who the recipients are. John simply refers to the readers as “my little children.” This term of endearment means that they were Christians. If Ephesus is the correct place of writing, then John likely addressed Christians in Asia Minor in the vicinity of that city.

Occasion: The occasion of the epistle is twofold. First, put positively, John’s purpose was to promote assurance of salvation (1 John 5:13)¹ for those who were christologically sound, i.e. those who believed the “right things” concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, and for those who demonstrated a genuine love for God and for other believers in Christ, i.e. those whose lifestyle reflected a correct and orthodox theology.

¹ 1 John 5:13 (“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.”) is often and appropriately referred to as the letter’s main purpose statement, but 1 John does contain other statements of purpose that should also be considered. For example, John writes: to promote Christian fellowship and joy in his life and in the lives of his readers (1:3-4); to keep these believers from committing sin (2:1); and to protect them from false teachers (2:26; 4:1-3). Citing D. Hiebert, Akin (*1, 2, 3 John*, 32) rightly notes, “The contents of the epistle . . . are most advantageously studied in the light of the writer’s purpose as stated in 5:13.”

Second, put negatively, John wanted to refute some heresies that were related to one another.² The growing movement of Gnosticism, which proved quite troublesome to Christianity, was fully-developed in the second century. But the framework which led to that fully-developed heresy was already in place in the first-century. John combats three different false teachings which seem to be part of an incipient or proto-Gnosticism. He refutes (1) an antinomian heresy, which many believe to be that of the Nicolaitans;³ this antinomianism had to do with lawlessness, debauchery, licentiousness, and every kind of immorality. The antinomian heresy was closely related to early Gnosticism in that its advocates saw “the body as a mere envelope covering the human spirit, which . . . was inviolable”; others, according to Irenaeus, thought it possible to become truly “spiritual,” where one progressed beyond the possibility of any defilement.”⁴ Accordingly, they thought that one could be righteous without practicing righteousness. But in his letter John emphasizes that God must be seen as holy and righteous, and thus he can require the same kind of holiness and righteousness from his creatures that would have fellowship with him. And this teaching would knock out the heresy which says that you can live like the devil, i.e. you can live an unholy, immoral, licentious, debauched life, and still have fellowship with God.

John also combats (2) a docetic Gnosticism which rejected the incarnation of Christ. Gnosticism gets its name from the Greek word *gnōsis* which means “knowledge,” and it was an early heresy, the adherents of which claimed to have exclusive, super-knowledge concerning spiritual things, a knowledge far beyond that which the average person had and which was available only to those who submitted themselves to the rigors and initiation into the Gnostic order. They believed that matter is evil and spirit is good, an idea largely derived from ancient Greek philosophy. The outworking of this belief was that the material body, since it is a part of matter, is essentially evil. The soul, or the spirit, would be good. Therefore, applying this idea to Jesus Christ—and remember these people claimed to be Christians, and yet

² Scholars have found it very difficult to determine with utter certainty the nature of the false teachers in 1 John. The best approach here is to study the text of the letter itself and to consider statements found in the tradition of the early church. On the theological struggle and opponents in 1 John, see G. Burge, “Letters of John,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (Eds. R. P. Martin and P.H. Davids; Downers Grove, IL.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 590-93.

³ Irenaeus connects such moral laxity with the Nicolaitans who originated from Nicolas (Acts 6:5; cf. Rev. 2:14-15); cited by Robert G. Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Des Plaines, IL.: Regular Baptist Press, 1974), 370.

⁴ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John* (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), 79.

they were caught up in this heresy—if matter is evil and spirit is good, then obviously it is impossible for the divine Christ to have had a material body because that would engage him in some way with that which is evil. So, they came up with a doctrine that today is called Docetism, or docetic Gnosticism. The word “docetic” is related to the Greek word *dokeō*, which means “to seem” or “to appear.” And this doctrine said that Christ did not really have an actual material body; he just “seemed” to have it; it “appeared” that way. In other words, he was a spiritual phantom, not a real, genuine human being. Therefore, as John refutes this heresy, he emphasizes the reality of Jesus Christ as both God and man. The latter emphasis is very prominent in this epistle. Passages like the affirmation of Christ’s incarnation in 1 John 4:1-3 could well have been directed against docetic Gnosticism.

Another Gnostic falsehood that John refutes came from (3) the teachings of Cerinthus,⁵ who made a distinction between a divine Christ-spirit and the man Jesus who had a physical body. Cerinthus claimed that this divine Christ-spirit came upon the human Jesus at his baptism, and then left him just before his crucifixion. Consequently, Jesus the man, not the Son of God, died on the cross. First John 5:6 might have been marshaled against Cerinthian Gnosticism. John denies this heresy and affirms that the Jesus Christ who died was the same Jesus Christ who was baptized.

John instructs his readers that since God is holy, he requires that those who are in fellowship with him be holy also. He emphasizes the holiness and righteousness of God. If God is holy and righteous, light rather than darkness, and love rather than hate, then upright living should be reflected in those who are a part of his family, i.e. those who are genuinely related to him. Believers will not be infinitely holy as God is, but will insofar as it is possible for a human being to measure up in those areas. Thus, any person who is consistently unrighteous, unholy, or has a belligerent adversarial relationship toward his fellow Christians will automatically categorize himself as an unbeliever. Also, of course, those who do not have the proper view of the person and work of Christ will also be categorized as unbelievers. The epistle of 1 John essentially has to do with the criteria which determine the reality of Christian profession (5:13).

How do you know whether a person is really a Christian or whether he is an apostate, professing but not a genuine Christian? John answers this question in his letter, which has a tremendous application in our day.

⁵ Irenaeus says that John proclaimed his gospel in order to refute the errors of Cerinthus (*Adv. Haer.* 3.3.4; 3.11.1).

Purpose: Cf. 1 John 5:13. John provides assurance of salvation for those who measure up to the criteria: (1) orthodox belief (esp. in the Incarnation), (2) obedience/righteous living, and (3) love for other believers. These authenticating tests/criteria are discussed throughout the letter.

STUDY OUTLINE OF 1 JOHN⁶

- I. Eyewitness Authentication of the Incarnation of Christ, Which Provides the Basis for Fellowship between God and Man (1:1-4)
- II. The Criteria Which Determine the Reality of Christian Profession (1:5-5:13)
 - A. God is Light—Those in Fellowship with Him Walk in Purity Also (1:5-2:2).
 - B. True Christians Obey God (2:3-11).
 1. The “new” [yet old] commandment is to love other Christians.
 - C. The Life of Fellowship is Available to All Age Groups (2:12-14).
 - D. True Christians Avoid “Worldliness” (2:15-17).
 - E. The Threat of False Teaching (2:18-27)
 1. Unbelievers deny that Jesus is the Christ.
 - F. True Christians “Abide” in Christ, i.e. Keep His Word (2:28-3:3).
 - G. True Christians Do Not “Live in Sin” (3:4-10).
 - H. True Christians Love One Another, While Unbelievers Hate, Kill, Etc. (3:11-24).

⁶ I am indebted to Dr. William E. Bell, Jr., formerly Senior Professor of Religion at Dallas Baptist University. Much of this article greatly reflects and is based on his excellent teaching on the letters of John.

- I. True Christians Affirm That Jesus Christ Has Come in the Flesh (4:1-6).
 - J. True Christians Love God and One Another (4:7-12).
 - 1. Because God himself is love.
 - K. Summary of Grounds for Christian Assurance (4:13-5:3)
 - 1. Possession of Holy Spirit
 - 2. Confession of Jesus as Son of God
 - 3. Obedience to God, i.e. love for Christians
 - L. Reiteration of Absolute Necessity for Belief in God's Record of Christ's Person and Work (5:4-12)
 - M. Statement of John's Purpose in Writing (5:13)
 - 1. Assurance of salvation for those who measure up to the criteria
- III. Conclusion (5:14-21)
- A. The Power of Prayer and the Sin to Death (5:14-17)
 - B. The Christian's Assurance in Christ vs. the Satanic World (5:18-20)
 - C. Final Warning Against Idolatry (5:21)

2 JOHN: DO NOT HOUSE OR SUPPORT FALSE TEACHERS

Author: The "Elder," i.e. John the Apostle. It was not uncommon for an apostle to call himself an elder (cf. 1 Peter 5:1). The term is particularly apropos for John to use to describe himself at this point in his life because he is an old man—the last of the apostles still alive!

Provenance: Likely written in Asia Minor in the vicinity of Ephesus

Date: The traditional date is again c. A.D. 95/96, but a date somewhere around A.D. 90-95 is not unreasonable, but likely later than 1 John.

Destination/Recipients: The “chosen/elect lady and her children,” probably a local congregation or house-church in Asia Minor near Ephesus.

Purpose: In the light of the recent danger from false teachers, the Christians in this congregation or house church are urged by John to continue loving fellow believers and refuse any support or hospitality to false teachers who deny Jesus as the incarnate Christ.

OUTLINE OF 2 JOHN

- I. Salutation (vv. 1-3)
- II. Love Fellow Believers (vv. 4-6)
- III. Refuse Support to False Teachers Who Reject Apostolic Doctrine (vv. 7-11)
- IV. Closing (vv. 12-13)

3 JOHN: SHOW HOSPITALITY TO ITINERANT MISSIONARIES

Author: The “Elder,” i.e. John the Apostle. It was not uncommon for an apostle to call himself an elder (cf. 1 Peter 5:1). The term is particularly apropos for John to use to describe himself at this point in his life because he is an old man—the last of the apostles still alive!

Provenance: Likely written in Asia Minor in the vicinity of Ephesus

Date: The traditional date is again c. A.D. 95/96, but a date somewhere around A.D. 90-95 is not unreasonable, but likely later than 2 John.

Destination/Recipients: Gaius, perhaps a convert of the apostle John. Where Gaius lived is unknown, but the location may be near Ephesus.

Purpose: Gaius is urged to continue his generous hospitality toward traveling Christian preachers, despite the refusal of such support by Diotrephes, a controlling and autocratic leader “who loves to be first.”

OUTLINE OF 3 JOHN

- I. Salutation (vv. 1-4)
- II. Commendation of Gaius (vv. 5-8)
- III. Warning Against Diotrephes (vv. 9-10)
- IV. Commendation of Demetrius (vv. 11-12)
- V. Closing (vv. 13-14)