

First John

Authorship

The author is not named in 1 John. External testimony attributed it to the Apostle John and internal evidence confirms such a conclusion.¹

Date

Dating of the Johannine epistles are linked to the dates for the Gospel and Revelation. It is generally concluded by those who accept John's authorship of all five books that the Gospel was written first, the three epistles next, and Revelation last. However, the time of writing is debated. In line with taking the early date for Revelation (A.D. 68), 1 John is dated by Robinson in the early 60's.²

Original Readers

Robinson contends that "... the epistles were ... written to reassure Jewish Christian congregations in Asia Minor, who were the product of the Johannine mission and in danger of being shaken from their faith and morals by false teachers of a gnosticizing tendency. In other words, the situation is remarkably parallel to that which we postulated for Jude and 2 Peter."³

Occasion

John is compelled by a pastoral concern for a group of Christians whom he considers children in the faith. They have been approached by false teachers, whom John calls antichrists, who had "gone out" from the apostles as though somehow representative of them (1 John 2:19;cf. Acts 15:24). John is writing to counter their heresy concerning Jesus Christ and the resulting threat to their Christian experience.⁴

Special Issues

The major issue of 1 John is the main interpretational and theological issue that surrounds many passages of the New Testament, namely, whether John is being written against

¹ See Donald Guthrie, *Introduction to the New Testament*, 4th ed. rev., (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 858-64. Guthrie remarks that "... similarities of thought and even expressions are so striking that it is a fair assumption, disputed by only a minority of critics, that the author of this epistle was the author of the fourth gospel" (861).

² See J. A. T. Robinson, *Redating the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1976), 284-311. Hodges opts for a date circa 64 to 65 (Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John*. Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 27.

³ *Ibid.*, 285. Hodges basically concurs with this (*Epistles of John*, 27).

⁴ Cf. Hodges, *Epistles of John*, 34-38.

the background of genuine belief or false profession. With respect to 1 John this revolves around the question of whether the various tests posed in the book are tests of life or tests of fellowship, that is, whether they identify those who are truly Christians or those Christians who may make the additional claim to know God intimately. The interpreter's prior theological stance on this issue will greatly affect how various statements in the book are to be understood.

Theme Statement

Fellowship with God will result in the perfection of love and produce confidence at Christ's coming.

Outline

- I. Prologue on Fellowship: The Eternal Life is being declared so that the readers might have fellowship with the Father and Son.1:1-4
 - A. The author has first hand knowledge of the Word of life.1:1-2
 - B. The author declares The Life for the purpose of fellowship.1:3-4
 1. It is the same fellowship of the apostolic company.1:3a
 2. It is fellowship with the Father and Son.1:3b
 3. It results in the fullness of joy.1:4
- II. The Principle of Fellowship: Life in the light leads to knowledge of God.1:5–2:11
 - A. The principle stated: God is light; darkness has no counsel with Him.1:5
 - B. The principle expounded: living life in the light is the essence of knowing God.1:6–2:11
 1. The practice of fellowship involves walking in the light obediently.1:6–2:2
 - a. Fellowship only occurs by walking in the light, cleansed by the blood of Christ.1:6-7
 - b. Experientially, sin is cleansed by confession.1:8-10
 - c. Legally, sin is covered by propitiation.2:1-2
 2. The goal of fellowship is coming to know God intimately.2:3-11
 - a. Observing the commandments validates the claim to know God.2:3-4
 - b. Observing God's word brings the perfection of the love of God...2:5-11
 - 1) It is a common walk.2:5-6
 - 2) It reflects the old/new command.2:7-8
 - 3) It loves the brother.2:9-11
- III. The Prospect of Fellowship: The present condition of the readership argues the real potential of knowing God through fellowship.2:12-27
 - A. Their attained spiritual condition argues for it.2:12-14
 - B. Their changed relation to the world argues for it.2:15-17
 - C. Their reception of the Holy Spirit argues for it.2:18-27
 1. He has confirmed the truth of the Son to them.2:18-23
 2. He will continue to guide them into all truth.2:24-27

- IV. The Practice of Fellowship: in order to be ready for the Lord's appearing one must become characterized by the righteousness of love.2:28-4:19
- A. The goal stated: The believer must abide in Christ so as to have confidence at His appearing.2:28
- B. The well-spring of righteousness is the life-generating seed of God.2:29-3:10a
1. Righteous action is evidence of being born of God.2:29-3:3
 2. Lawless action always stems from the devil.3:4-10a
 - a. Sin is not part of the abiding experience.3:4-6
 - b. Righteousness stems from He who is righteous.3:7
 - c. Those motivated by God and the devil are evident.3:8-10a
- C. The practice of righteousness involves love of the brethren.3:10b-4:16
1. This love arises from the experience of abiding.3:10b-15
 2. This love assures the heart in the truth.3:16-23
 - a. Love is known by Christ's example.3:16-18
 - b. Love assures of the truth.3:19a
 - c. Love assures the heart before God.3:19b-21
 - d. Love receives what is requested.3:22-23
 3. This love attains certainty of the indwelling God.3:24-4:16
 - a. The Spirit imparts knowledge of the truth.3:24-4:6
 - b. Loving one another shows that God is known.4:7-11
 - c. Loving one another reveals God indwelling.4:12-16
- D. The goal reviewed: Perfection in love will result in confidence in the day of judgment.4:17-19
- V. Provision for Fellowship: Faith in the Son is the key to all.4:20-5:17
- A. Faith accomplishes the commandment of love.4:20-5:4
 - B. Faith certifies the testimony of the provision of God.5:5-13
 - C. Faith intercedes through confident prayer.5:14-17
- VI. Epilogue: Knowledge of the true God and eternal life deliver from error.5:18-21

These Statement

Fellowship with God will result in the perfection of love and produce confidence at Christ's coming.

Theme Development

Eternal life is mankind's most precious possession. Through Jesus Christ this gift is both freely received and continually enjoyed. However, the initial reception does not guarantee a deep and satisfying enjoyment of eternal life. The essence of this life is the knowledge of God (cf. John 17:3). Coming to really know God is a life-long walk of fellowship, made possible by the One who revealed and provided such a relationship, Jesus Christ. Hence, any defect in one's understanding of Jesus' person and work necessarily affects the quality, even possibility, of

fellowship with him and his Father. John's letter to his dear spiritual children appraises and corrects just such a threat to the believer's day-to-day experience with God.

I. Prologue on Fellowship: The Eternal Life is being declared so that the readers might have fellowship with the Father and Son (1:1-4).

John establishes his credentials for instructing the readers about the experience of eternal life. He, along with other apostles, have intently examined and even "handled" the One in whom eternal life resides, Jesus Christ (1:1). Though the readership could never share that particular experience, they could be taught what was sharable in order to have the same joyous experience of fellowship with the divine Father and Son that the apostles were currently sharing (1:2-4).

II. The Principle of Fellowship: Life in the light leads to knowledge of God (1:5-2:11).

The principle of fellowship is really quite simple: live where God lives (1:5). The problem is that God, as light, lives in the light and man's experience is associated with the darkness due to the unavoidable presence of sin. Though the believer has been delivered from the power of darkness (cf. Col 1:13), he or she may still participate in the ways of darkness, thereby forsaking close companionship with the Father and his Son (1:6). However, if the believer chooses to live in such a way that his or her life is continually exposed to the directives and correctives of the word of truth, then fellowship ensues and any defiling spot of sin is taken care of by the blood of Christ (1:7). When one becomes aware of sin and confesses it, then fellowship is maintained, all unrighteousness being cleansed in the process (1:9). We can never say that we are without sin (1:8) and we should never deny a revealed sin (1:10) if fellowship is the goal of living. Since Christ has fully dealt with sin's penalty and power, the believer's reasonable objective ought to be to live apart from it, even though to fail will never bring legal culpability due to Christ's advocacy (2:1-2).

Having stated the practice of fellowship with respect to the problem of sin, John next summarizes the goal of fellowship, which is coming to know God intimately (2:3-11). The test of whether one may claim intimacy with God, is observance of what He commands (1:3-4). Abiding in Christ, that is, being at home in His presence and in sympathy with His goals and ways, will be evidenced by action like His (1:5-6), which is supremely embodied in love of the brethren (1:7-11). The rest of the book will develop this relationship.

III. The Prospect of Fellowship: The present condition of the readership argues the real potential of knowing God through fellowship (2:12-27).

Exactly what is the potential for such a relationship? According to John it is an excellent one for the readership. First, they have attained a spiritual stature that bodes well for a full realization of the promises of fellowship (2:12-14). Their past and present experiences in the faith argue for such a success.⁵ They also have a new relationship with the world system, and are capable, therefore, of resisting its corrupting lusts (2:15-17). They also have the Holy Spirit, who reveals to them the truth about the false teachers who have come among them, as though from the Apostles themselves, in order to deny the essential identity of Jesus as Messiah (2:18-23). If the readers stay in tune with the truth, as confirmed by the Spirit, then they will continue to abide in Christ (2:24-27).

IV. The Practice of Fellowship: in order to be ready for the Lord's appearing one must become characterized by the righteousness of love (2:28-4:19).

How does fellowship work itself out in practice? What does it look like and what will Christ be looking for in the life of his own when he returns? This is the concern of the main body of the letter.

A. The goal stated: The believer must abide in Christ so as to have confidence at his appearing (2:28).

If the believer wants to be confident that when the Lord Jesus appears there will be no reason for shame, then his experience must be one of abiding. Otherwise there will be loss.

B. The well-spring of righteousness is the life-generating seed of God (2:29-3:10a).

Righteousness can have only one source, God. Whenever someone does something righteous (as God defines it), then it must be concluded that that person has been born from above (2:29). This is an amazing truth that the world does not understand (3:1), which promises an incredible future that even the believer cannot comprehend (3:2-3). However, the Christian does not always act in accordance with his spiritual birth. When this happens, the source of his action has actually been the devil (3:8); it can never be said to have been part of the abiding experience (3:6). In other words, sin does not come from the new creation, that which has come into being as a result of the divine seed of life (3:9). It always stems, even for the believer, from

⁵ The referents of 2:12-14 have been taken by most to refer to the readership and by some to leaders (cf. Hodges, *Epistles of John*, 91-101). If referring to the readership the three different designations could either look at three different groups within the readership (as referring to spiritual age) or they could all refer to the readership as a whole from different aspects of their Christian experience.

the one who has sinned from the beginning (3:8). Thus the source of any work (not the nature of the worker) may be determined by whether that work is righteous or lawless (3:10a). Therefore, righteousness is a test of abiding, not of life.⁶

C. The practice of righteousness involves love of the brethren (3:10b–4:16).

Love has already been introduced as part and parcel of knowing God and the abiding experience (1:5-10). Now love is related to the practice of righteousness in very practical terms. Love is the ultimate in the transformation that takes place while walking in the light and, therefore, the quintessential affirmation that one knows God intimately.

Love of the brethren captures the essence of practical Christianity and flows only from the experience of abiding (3:10b-15). The alternative is to abide in death, that is, to let the flesh dominate to such an extent that the believer is unable to presently enjoy eternal living (3:14-15). The standard and definition of love is the Savior giving his life for mankind (3:16). Such giving of oneself evidences the abiding presence of God's love (3:16b-17). This type of giving assures the heart that it is living in accordance with the truth (3:19a) and facilitates openness with God (3:19b). The end of such confidence is effectual prayer, as the believer strives to please the Father after the example of the Son, especially with respect to the life of love (3:21-23).

Ultimately this pattern of love will result in a certainty of the indwelling presence of God (3:24–4:16). It is the Spirit by which one knows this abiding (3:24), a Spirit who imparts discernment between truth and error with respect to the person of Christ (4:1-6). Everyone who becomes perfected in love, becomes assured not only of being a child of God's but also of knowing Him (4:7-11). This perfecting in love also results in a powerful demonstration of the reality of the presence of God in the world, most readily understood by the great gift of his Son (4:12-16).

D. The goal reviewed: Perfection in love will result in confidence in the day of judgment (4:17-19).

From the perfecting of the experience of love, realized through abiding in Christ, the believer derives boldness in the anticipation of the judgment seat of Christ. There will be no fear of disapproval or loss of reward. Instead there will be a certain confidence in the fact that the same experience that gained Christ his approval before the Father has become in some genuine measure the experience of the abiding believer. "We love Him because He first loved us."

⁶ For a cogent discussion of the passage see Hodges, *Epistles of John*, 126-145.

V. Provision for Fellowship: Faith in the Son is the key to all (4:20–5:17).

Such an experience, and such an expectation, is not possible on one's own. This obedience and certitude must be effected by faith.

A. Faith accomplishes the commandment of love (4:20–5:4).

John summarizes the often repeated commandment to love the brethren in order to explore further the implications of such an expectation (4:20-21). It is through faith that one is born of God and, therefore, becomes responsible for loving others of His children (5:1-3). It is also by faith that such a commandment is carried out (5:4).

B. Faith certifies the testimony of the provision of God (5:5-13).

Faith always has an object, it is not simply a strong desire or resolution (e.g., to love as Christ loved). The object is Jesus, the Son of God, whom the Holy Spirit has certified as coming by water and blood, that is, being put forth as the Messiah at his baptism and dying as the Savior. The Spirit has given a certainty of this to the one who believes in Christ. The result is assurance of the possession of eternal life and the encouragement to continue to look to Christ as the enabling power in life (5:13).

C. Faith intercedes through confident prayer (5:14-17).

Faith is active in prayer when it petitions God for that which He purposes for the believer (5:14-15). Since the commandment of love has been the primary issue at hand in John's treatment of the abiding life, it is fitting that care for the life of the brethren rounds out the discussion. In this case love petitions God to give life to a brother who is sinning, so that his lawlessness will not necessitate his temporal demise, a case for which confidence in prayer is not assured (5:16-17). Faith enables love out of the abiding experience of the believer.

VI. Epilogue: Knowledge of the true God and eternal life deliver from error (5:18-21).

In another statement of review, John summarizes three certitudes that support his view of the way of fellowship with God. First, the believer, in his essence as a spiritual being, is safe from the wicked one (5:18). Second, those who so live derive their ability from God (5:19). Third, the Son of God has come so that these things can be known, so that fellowship with God may become a reality (5:20). With such an exalted prospect, consideration of any other object of worship should be scarcely more than an afterthought (5:21).

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