

Introduction to I John

The first epistle of John has been a document utilized by Christian peoples for devotional meditation throughout the centuries of Christian history. Why have Christians gravitated toward this letter as a scriptural source for personal inspiration? Probably because John expresses the most profound of spiritual thoughts in simple sentences with many monosyllable words. Many an author (including this one) could learn from John's simple expression of profound realities.

Despite the popular usage of this epistle for devotional purposes, it has often been neglected and avoided in the exegetical exposition of Christian preachers and teachers. Why? Because many have determined that it poses some theological quandaries, conundrums and perplexities. Chuck Swindoll, for example, explained his avoidance of I John as a text for expository preaching by noting the problems of (1) conditionalism in the "if..." phrases of 1:5-10, (2) commandment-keeping in 2:3,4 and 3:22-24, (3) the identification of "antichrist" in 2:18,22 and 4:3, (4) exclusion of sin in 3:6 and 5:18, (5) the determinative factor of loving relationships in 3:14-16 and 4:7-21, and (6) the meaning of the "sin not unto death" in 5:16,17, admitting that he could not answer any of the problems thus raised.¹ These are certainly issues that must be considered in any study of this epistle.

Some have questioned, though, whether this document should legitimately be identified as an epistle. It lacks the traditional epistolary salutation and conclusion, and contains no specific identification of author or readers. Yet it is obvious that the author has specific readers in mind with whom he was personally acquainted and aware of their specific situation (cf. 2:1,26). Some commentators have suggested that it might have originally been a homily or sermon. Ebrard suggested that it might have been a cover letter used in the distribution of the Apocalypse of John. Whatever the original form and objective, this written composition comprises a meaningful part of the canon of the New Testament that is profitable (cf. II Tim. 3:16) for Christians in every age.

The authorship of this document (which we will in accord with tradition refer to as an epistle) has by overwhelming consensus been attributed to John the Apostle. The text itself does not refer to John as the author, but neither does the gospel account attributed to John.

External evidence of John's authorship includes citations from many early Christian writers. Polycarp, Papias, Irenaeus, Tertullian, Clement of Alexandria and Origen all refer to this epistle, citing various verses and attributing them to the Apostle John. In fact, all of the early church Fathers, both Greek and Latin, seem to have accepted this epistle as from the hand of the Apostle John. The Muratorian Canon of 170 A.D. included this epistle and accepted its author as John.

The internal evidence of John's authorship is equally convincing. The author indicates that he was an eyewitness (1:1; 4:14), as John, the disciple of Jesus, certainly was. The similarities between this epistle and the other writings attributed to John are amazingly conclusive evidence of John's authorship, as evidenced by recent computer analysis of the Johannine writings. The openings of this epistle and the gospel have similar concepts (cf. John 1:1-18 and I John 1:1-4). The grammatical style and vocabulary are similar. Both documents employ common phrases, such as "to have sin," "to do the truth," "to abide," "to overcome the world," and the "spirit of truth." There are common antitheses of abstract ideas in these writings, such as light/darkness, truth/error, love/hate, and God/world. Clement of Alexandria noted in the third century that "to attentive observers it will be obvious that there is one and the same complexion in the gospel and epistle." Later the British writer, William Ramsay, explained that "There can be no doubt

that the same hand can be traced in the first epistle and the fourth gospel. No two works in the whole range of literature show clearer signs of the genius of one writer.”

The history of the Apostle John’s life from about age forty through age ninety, a span of approximately one-half century, is a mystery. John disappears from reference in the Biblical narrative after the eighth chapter of Acts, although he is referred to in Paul’s letter to the Galatians (2:9). It was apparently in his latter years, perhaps in the last decade of the first century, that John was prompted to write the documents that are extant in our New Testament. Iranaeus, writing in the second century, indicates that John saw the visions of the Revelation “almost in our day, toward the end of Domitian’s reign.” (Domitian reigned as emperor until 96 A.D.) Clement of Alexandria records that “he (John) returned from the isle of Patmos to Ephesus.” Iranaeus, again, explained that John “published a gospel during his residence at Ephesus of Asia.” Polycarp noted that “John lies asleep (was buried) at Ephesus.” Though we do not possess specific references to the date or place of writing of this first epistle of John, we surmise that it was written in the same general period of time as his other writings, toward the end of the first century, probably from Ephesus.

The original recipients of this epistle were probably Gentile Christians in the churches of Asia Minor. It is not clear whether it was written to a single, local congregation of Christians or to a group of churches in the same area of the seven churches mentioned in the Revelation, but the lack of a specifically stated destination allows for a larger circle of intended readers. Seemingly aware of his readers’ situation (2:1,26), John addresses his readers as “beloved” and “children” which might indicate a personal relationship of an older “father figure” with the recipients of this letter. He accepts that they are knowledgeable Christians who did not need additional teaching (cf. 2:7,21,27; 3:11), probably because he was instrumental in their instruction. There were issues that concerned John, though, and these correlate well with the concerns expressed to the seven churches addressed in Revelation, that they were allowing the features of man-made religion to override the dynamic of God’s grace in the Spirit of Christ. Religion always seeks relevancy and is tempted to reinterpret and adapt the Christian faith in terms of modern thought. Noting that Gnosticism became a full-blown philosophical system in the second century, and that this epistle was apparently written toward the end of the first century, many have suggested that the numerous references to “knowing” in this letter (41 references) may have been directed toward the nascent Gnostic concept of knowledge. References to the incarnational humanity of Jesus (cf. 1:1,2; 4:2; 5:6) may have been directed at the docetic idea (docetism) inherent in Gnosticism which denied the humanity of Jesus and posited that Jesus only “appeared” to be human. As Gnosticism fostered antinomianism and license, John’s emphasis on representative behavior derivatively expressive of the character of God may have been intended to combat the inadequate view of sin within that system of thought. We can only speculate from the emphases of the text itself what was the occasion and purpose of John’s writing this letter.

The interpretation and exposition of this letter of John has proven to be problematic down through the centuries of Christian teaching and preaching. As previously noted, many exegetes have wrestled with what appear to be theological conundrums in correlating John’s statements in this epistle with the concepts of grace expounded in the Pauline literature. Some of these problems can be overcome if commentators are willing to come to the text without predetermined theological presuppositions, and engage in *exegesis* instead of *eisegesis*. Other problems will remain open to interpretive differences among Christians.

Footnote:

1 Swindoll, Charles, From transcription of a taped sermon preached at Fullerton, CA.