

1 JOHN

Introduction

Author. Although the book is anonymous we can be very certain that John, the son of Zebedee, is the author. The external testimony is very strong; early Christian writers including Irenaeus (130-200 A. D., probably a student of Polycarp, who was a student of John), Clement of Alexandria (150-215 A. D.) and Tertullian (155-220 A. D.) all cited the epistle, attributing authorship to John. The author was clearly an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus (1:1-3) which would eliminate nearly all of the other possibilities as to authorship.

Internal evidence also points strongly to John's authorship. Many words and phrases used in 1 John are found nowhere else except in John's writings: 1) reference to Jesus as the *Word of God*, (John 1:1; 1 John 1:1; Rev 19:13); 2) *your joy will be complete*, (John 16:24; 1 John 1:4); 3) *walking in darkness*, (John 3:21; 1 John 1:6); 4) *a new command*, (John 13:34; 1 John 2:8).

Date. The writing is very difficult to date. A date from 85 to 95 A. D. would be reasonable.

Occasion. A number of factors seem to have required this letter. The fervor or commitment of the first generation of Christians had begun to wane. Believers were growing careless about standards of separation and doctrinal deviations had arisen. Although the fully developed Gnosticism of the 2nd century had not yet evolved, incipient stages of it may be detected in John's writings. The most that can be affirmed based upon what John states in his epistle is that the chief and most basic error of the doctrinal deviations is a denial of the truth concerning the person of Jesus Christ. He may be, among other things, refuting the error of Docetism in 1:1-2 and the error of Cerinthianism in 5:6. Thus, the people needed to be warned of false teachers and their heresies and encouraged to walk in fellowship and deepen their fellowship with God.

Although this book was clearly a written message (2:26; 4:1) it does not contain many of the standard elements of an epistle (no introduction, greetings, personal notes, closing salutation). Thus, it may have been written as a sermon to be read to a number of different congregations, i.e., an *encyclical sermon*.

Message Statement. *Fellowship with God and growth in that fellowship is dependent upon our response to the message of the Word of life.*

Argument

1A INTRODUCTION: FELLOWSHIP WITH THE APOSTLES AND GOD BRINGS JOY 1:1-4
John states the goal of his writing, namely, fellowship in the first verses of the book. His design is that the readers will come to have the same sense of relationship with God that the apostles have. His desire is that his followers not only enjoy fellowship with God but that they also continue to grow in their fellowship. If the readers share in

this truth and experience then joy will be the result. The conditional factor in this situation is the reader's reception of the apostle's message. The Word of Life has appeared, and been proclaimed, it must now be obediently received if the goal is to be obtained.

John speaks in words of tangible reality (heard, seen, looked, touched). His reference of course is to the incarnation of God in the person of Jesus Christ. John seems to emphasize the concrete reality of this truth and also its origin. His gospel and teaching find their roots in the very life and person of Jesus. Whatever the source of his opponents' teaching, the source of John's doctrine enjoys the sure foundation of the Son of God himself.

- 1B **HAVING FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD DEPENDS ON OUR RESPONSE TO HIM** 1:5--2:27
 In the first two chapters John lays down foundational truths about enjoying, and being comfortable in, a relationship with God. The basic factor which influences the quality of this fellowship, is the readers' sincere response to the message of the Word of Life.
- 1B Experiencing Forgiveness Of Sins 1:5--2:2
 The experiencing of the forgiveness of sins is dependent upon the confession of sin which is exposed by the Word of God. John first states that the standard of fellowship with God is holiness. Therefore no sin will be tolerated in his presence. Because the sinful nature of the believer will eventually and continually erupt, the only possible recourse for the believer who wants to have fellowship with a holy God is for him to deal honestly with sin. This dealing with sin simply involves a recognition of sin as sin and a confession of it to God.
- John deals with three possible realities in regard to sin, each one involving a denial of sin and also a description of the proper solution. Although some have seen a progression in the three sets of verses (1:6-7; 8-9; 10--2:2) they may best be understood as restatements or amplifications of a single truth. The error seems to be the denial of the acts of sin; the solution is an honest acknowledgment and confession of sin, all of which is based upon the forgiveness provided by the atonement on Calvary. When sin is denied no fellowship is possible; when confession is made, forgiveness is guaranteed and fellowship is attainable.
- 2B Coming to Know God 2:3-11
 Coming to know God is dependent upon keeping the commands of God as demonstrated in the life of Jesus. This section resembles the first chapter in its structure in that it begins with a statement of the standard of fellowship (2:3) and continues with a statement of error (2:4) and of truth (2:5). John first lays down the general principle that coming to know God depends upon keeping his commands (2:3-6) and then concentrates on a the specific command to love (2:7-11). John again defines failure to meet the standard for fellowship in this section (2B) as he did in the previous section (1B) as *walking in darkness*. The one who does not deal honestly with sin *walks in darkness* (1:6) as does the one who does not keep the commands of God, specifically the command of love (*walks around in darkness*, 2:11). Thus, coming to know God depends upon the individual's reception of and obedient response to the message of the apostles.
- 3B The Purpose in Writing 2:12-14
 Although some of John's readers might question whether they walk in darkness after his first two statements of fellowship (1B and 2B above) he now assures them that he is confident of their fellowship and writes not to doubt it but to enhance it. He now addresses the believers using three different labels: *children, fathers* and *young men*. These may represent three classes of believers or simply be three different characterizations of the whole group. Nevertheless, he has three basic things to say about the groups: they have 1) experienced forgiveness of sin; 2) have known the Father, and; 3) have overcome the evil one. The first two concepts have just been addressed (forgiveness of sin, 1:5--2:2; knowing God 2:3-11) and the last concept (overcoming the evil one) is the next subject to be addressed by the apostle, 2:15-27. John lists the three groups (children, fathers, young men) twice and attaches these three characteristics (forgiveness of sins, knowing God and overcoming evil) to them. In his first statement about the three groups (2:12-13a) he lists the characteristics in this order, i.e., *forgiveness of sins* first (2:12), *knowing God* second (2:13a) and *overcoming evil* last (2:13b). In the second listing the characteristic of overcoming the evil one again comes last and is expanded to *I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God lives in you, and you have overcome the evil one* (2:14b). This arrangement serves to introduce and emphasize the next major topic of the book, *overcoming the Evil one*, both in the world and in false teachers, by means of abiding in the word of God (2:15-27).
- 4B Overcoming the Evil One 2:15-27
 Overcoming the Evil one in the world (2:15-17) and in false teachers (2:18-19) depends upon abiding in the truth taught by the apostles (2:20-27). This concept is best summarized in 2:14b which serves as a transition

and introduction to this final division (4B) of the first half (2A) of the book.

- 1C In the world 2:15-17
John's description of the world is classic. He basically describes it as sinful and temporary. The exhortation is obviously to not love the world or anything in it. It would be foolish for a Christian, who is eternal (2:17b) to become attached to something which is temporal (2:17a).
- 2C In false teachers 2:18-19
The working of the evil one is also evident in false teachers. John clearly describes these teachers when he calls them *antichrists*. Evidently these people were at one time members of the church. John would know well how a man could claim allegiance to Jesus, follow him for years, and then betray him. Having experienced the emotional and mental turmoil which such a situation could cause, John was well suited to warning the people not to be deceived by these turncoats.
- 3C The solution of abiding in the truth 2:20-27
The solution to overcoming the evil one, as John previously and summarily announced (2:14b), was to abide in the Word or, more accurately, allow the Word to abide in you (2:14b, 24, 27). John calls this truth an *anointing* twice in this section (2:20, 27) and exhorts his readers to allow it to live in them (2:27). He also exhorts his readers to allow *what they have heard* to live in them (2:24) suggesting at least a parallelism, if not an equation, between *what they have heard* and the *anointing*. Thus, it is this writer's opinion that the *anointing* is a reference to the special revelation given in the first century, particularly that given through the apostles (1:1). It is given the generic term of *anointing* because of the various ways in which revelation would come in the first century, sometimes, orally from a prophet or apostle, or sometimes written from an apostle. Rather than referring to the Holy Spirit himself or to some subjective response from the Holy Spirit, John seems to intend the *Holy Spirit inspired message of truth* which was received by the believers. Thus, John encourages victory over the evil one by obeying and abiding in the message of the Word of Life received from the apostles (1:1-3).
- 1C GROWING IN FELLOWSHIP WITH GOD DEPENDS ON OUR CONTINUED RESPONSE TO HIM 2:28--5:17
Having covered the basic aspects of fellowship in a basic manner, John now traverses the same ground but with greater and a slightly different emphasis. His goal in the first section seems to have been to encourage and lay down the ground rules for fellowship. At this point his goal seems to be to encourage continued growth in fellowship. The same basic topics are covered, *forgiveness of sin, knowing God* and *overcoming the evil one*, except this time, in reverse order.
- 1B Continued Fellowship with Him 2:28
This statement seems to be the beginning of the next section because here John plainly states the emphasis of it, *And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.*
- 2B Overcoming Evil 2:29--4:6
Overcoming the evil one in our personal desires and in evil teachers depends upon righteous living and abiding in the teaching of the apostles with the result that we will have confidence before God at his coming. John's exhortation in this section is to overcome the evil one in both our personal lives and in our teaching. The terminology in this section and in the section previously about overcoming evil is very similar (2:15-27) where the topics of not loving the world and antichrist-sponsored teaching were discussed.
- 1C Evil desires 2:29--3:24
John uses the prototypical example of the struggle with evil in the person of Cain. As God introduced the struggle between the evil one and Himself (Genesis 3:15) one of the first examples is found in the conflict of the two brothers (Genesis 4). God's words to Cain then were "But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it" (Genesis 4:7). Cain of course, was overcome by evil, and thus stands as the perfect negative example in the struggle with the Evil one. His struggle with Satan was demonstrated in the practical relationship with his brother. So too, John applies the basic issue of overcoming evil (3:8b, *The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work*) into the practical demonstration of love for one's brother. If we do not love our brothers we have been overcome by evil.

The perfect positive example of overcoming evil is of course, the Seed of the woman, Jesus Christ.

It was in his victory over evil, at the cross, wherein he best demonstrated his love for brothers and thus becomes (for purposes of this discussion) the prototypical example for good. At Calvary he both overcame evil and demonstrated love for his brothers.

- 2C Evil teaching 4:1-6
 As John spoke of evil teachers previously as *antichrists* (2:18-27), now, he uses the same description (4:3) when he addresses the subject again. His discussion is basically twofold: the recognition of evil teaching (4:1-3) and the recognition of evil teachers (4:4-6). A crucial test of evil teaching is its view of Jesus. Teaching can not be true if it does not at least acknowledge the truth of the incarnation. Evil teachers are recognized (among other ways) by observing who listens to them. If a teacher attracts worldly people, then his teaching is probably from the world.
- 3B Knowing God 4:7-21
 Knowing God fully depends upon our living in love with the result that we will have confidence on the day of judgment (4:17). John's progression of thought in this section begins with the statement that knowing God is demonstrated by living in love (4:7-12). We know that God lives in us because of the Spirit he has given us (4:13-16a). The result of knowing God and living in love is confidence on the day of judgment (4:16b-18) and finally, walking in love means loving our brothers as well (5:19-21).
- 4B Being Born of God 5:1-17
 Being born of God depends upon one's belief that Jesus is the Christ with the result that we will have assurance in our salvation and thus in approaching God. Following the apostle's logic is more difficult in this section. His first statement seems to be that faith in Jesus as the Christ results in victory over the world (5:1-5). Being born of God is the result of believing the facts about the Son of God (5:6-12). In this section, particularly, John seems to be battling an incipient Gnosticism which taught that the Christ came upon Jesus at the water (baptism) and left before the cross (blood). The object of John's faith, and the faith of all those who are born again, is the resurrected Christ. This faith will bring assurance in one's salvation (5:13) and assurance in prayer (5:14-17).
- 1D CONCLUSION: CERTAINTIES IN OUR FELLOWSHIP 5:18-21
 Certainties in our fellowship with the Word of Life bring a true knowledge of eternal life and of God. John rejoices first that because of our salvation we know we have protection from the evil one even though all the world is under his control. More importantly, however, we have a true knowledge of God and of his Son and of his life. This is the essence of responding correctly to the message of the apostles (1:1-3) and of therefore having fellowship and joy (1:4). Anything less would be idolatry (5:21).

