

The Writings of John The Epistles

As we have seen in our previous sessions the writings of John differ considerably in style from the other N.T. writers. We have looked at the remarkable differences between the synoptic gospels and the gospel of John and in this final study we will be looking at the Epistles of John.

When we read 1 John, we can see how the style and content follow on closely from his gospel which means it was probably written by the same author. Despite the fact that 1 John and the gospel of John do not identify the author explicitly, the traditional view that these books are from John, the son of Zebedee, cannot be disproved. Again John opens with a prologue in the first four verses which emphasise the eyewitness testimony of the apostle. This again supports the view of the apostle John being the author.

The First Epistle of John

The first epistle of John was written to warn and instruct its readers about false teachings that denied Jesus had come in the flesh (2:26; 3:7; 4:2-3). We have already seen that false teachers brought numerous heresies that tried to infiltrate the true church of God. We have seen how “Gnosticism” taught that you can only get to heaven if you receive the special revelation that would allow you access to the heavenly realm, here the teaching is “Docetism”, which comes from the Greek word *dokeo* which means “to seem” or “to appear”. This heresy taught that Jesus only appeared to be a human, which means that there was no real incarnation and no divine Saviour who was able to die as an atonement for sinners. Jesus only “seemed” to die and therefore could not offer Himself as an actual sacrifice because He was not a real human being. This heresy was recorded from early on in church history and was used to try and discredit the validity of Jesus' work of atonement on the cross.

There are several things that indicate that 1 John was written after the gospel of John. Firstly, it makes brief references to ideas that John gives much more detail about in his gospel. Secondly, the conflict that seems to be present here with Docetism is absent from his gospel, which indicates that it was a later problem. Thirdly, in his gospel the Christian community were trying to establish themselves from the Jews, whereas 1 John indicates a later time when the Christian community had indeed established their own identity. Another indicator are letters from early church Fathers Ignatius and Polycarp, dated around 110 A.D. which also criticize false teachings similar to those found in 1 John, this would put John's epistle in the 90's A.D.

One of the recurring themes of 1 John is assurance, and John goes to great lengths to reassure his readers that they are Christians and he provides a number of ways in which they can know they are genuine believers. In keeping with the style of his gospel, John's method of reassuring his readers involves using contrasts like, those who walk in the light with those who walk in the darkness (1:6-7), those who say they have no sin with those who confess their sins (1:8-10). He goes on to contrast those who keep God's commandments with those who do not (2:3-6), and those who love their brother with those who hate their brother (2:9-11; 3:11-15). These contrasts carry through chapters 1-5, where John finally contrasts those who believe God with those who do not, and those who have the Son with those who do not (5:10-12).

Although 1 John is traditionally regarded as a letter, it has none of the features of a letter for example, an introductory greeting or a final greeting. But John does address his readers as “my little children” which tells us that he seems to be writing to a specific group of people who are very close to him. In terms of its purpose and instruction, 1 John is similar to other N.T. letters in spite of it not being a typical letter. Because there is no opening address or final farewell to a particular church, some scholars believe that 1 John may have been what is called a circular epistle, which means that it was intended for several churches. Another interesting feature of 1 John is its use of John's gospel, which was probably written earlier around the 80's or 90's A.D. John's gospel seems to be the key to understanding this epistle because of some of the issues found in 1 John, for example, John makes distinctions between true Christians and pseudo-Christians. 1 John also uses terms like light and darkness, truth and lies, and love and hate to make these distinctions.

These are terms found in John's gospel to distinguish between the true followers of Jesus and pseudo-believer's of God.

The Second Epistle of John

Again the style and content of 2 John lead us to believe it is written by the same author as 1 John and the gospel of John. This author is again traditionally believed to be the apostle John, son of Zebedee. This letter addresses the same false teaching that is opposed in 1 John which tells us that this letter was probably written around the same time (80's to 90's A.D.). However, it does not presuppose any knowledge of 1 John on the part of the reader. It is plausible that 2 John was written after 1 John but is more specific in that it identifies it's audience (1:1). 2 John is different from 1 John in that it is a standard letter of the day consisting of an opening (Vs.1-3), a body (Vs.4-11), and a conclusion (Vs.12-13). Unlike many of Paul's writings this letter is brief and in keeping with letter writing of the Greco-Roman world.

Verses 1-3

The author identifies himself as “the elder” and the addressee as “the elect lady” which tells us that the author has had pastoral responsibility for the addressee. There is a possibility that the term “elect lady” refers to the church itself and the term “her children”, refers to the members of the church. Whatever the case, there is no difficulty with an apostle using the term “elder” because the responsibility of an apostle toward church members included the responsibilities of an elder (see 1 Peter 5:1-5). “The elect lady” in Vs.1, and a similar term in Vs.13, have led some to believe that this refers to the church however, this term is not used anywhere else in Scripture. It is true that the church is referred to as “she” (1 Peter 5:13), a “bride” (Rev. 9:7), and the church at Corinth is compared to Eve who is betrothed to one husband (2 Cor. 11:2-3). Whether this lady is the church or an individual she is “elect” because of God's Sovereign grace and choice.

In 1 John Jesus is called “eternal life” (1 John 1:2), and it appears that “the truth” mentioned in Vs.2, represents the constant presence of Jesus with believer's through His Spirit. The source of “grace, mercy and peace” mentioned in Vs.3, is God Himself who is “truth and love”.

Verses 4-11

In Vs.4, “the elder” expresses his joy of seeing members of the household (or church), continuing in the faith. The “commandment” spoken of in Vs.5, is the commandment Jesus gave to His followers to “love one another” (John 13:34), and it is this love that is the hallmark of the Christian faith. In Vs. 7-11, John tackles the problems facing the early church which took the form of false teachers attacking the central truth of Christian doctrine, that Jesus is the eternal Son of God who took on human flesh in order to accomplish the salvation of God's chosen people (1 John 2:22; 4:2-3). To reject this truth is to reject all hope of reconciliation with God, but if we receive this truth we receive God Himself. John is warning the lady and her household (church), that the work of these false teachers threatens their spiritual growth to the extent of their hope in an eternal reward. One of the false teachings at the time of John was, as we saw earlier Docetism. The only way to remain safe from such heresies is to avoid these false teachers all together. All of the apostles worked hard to instil faith in the believer's that Jesus came in the flesh, and it is through Jesus that believer's will receive their eternal reward, by the grace of God. John gives a stern warning against false teachers and their doctrines and warns believer's to “*not receive him into your house...*” This is in contrast to 3 John 5-8, where John encourages believer's to welcome fellow believer's who proclaim the truth.

Verses 12-13

In closing his letter John expresses the fact there is no substitute for personal fellowship. Although letters are nice to both give and receive, John hopes to share with his readers the mutual encouragement that can only occur in person. He closes by bringing greetings from one Christian community to another, with a reminder for Christian unity, which was a common practise in apostolic letters. Again we see the term “elect sister” which may refer to another church with the “children” being members of that church.