

1 JOHN

1 JOHN 1-2:28 — GOD IS LIGHT

First John is addressed to no particular church or individual, but it is thought that the apostle had in mind a cycle of churches like the seven of Asia (see Revelation 1). It is likely that the Christians to whom he wrote were of Gentile rather than Jewish origin, as judged by the few references to the Old Testament, and by such allusions as that in chapter 5:21.

The epistle was written later than the Gospel by the same author, as gathered from the circumstances that an acquaintance with its facts is presupposed, and also because the words of Christ are cited if known.

The occasion of its writing seems to have been the presence of false teachers (e.g., see 2:18-26 and 4:1-6). And, indeed, we learn from the writers of church history that at a very early period there were three classes of heretics as they were called: The Ebionites, who denied the Deity of Christ; the Docetists, who denied His humanity; and the Cerinthians, who denied the union of the two natures, humane and divine, prior to His baptism.

The theme is stated to be Fellowship with God in 1:3-4, and the idea is presented to us not in a progression of thought, but after the manner of the law of recurrence, which we have come to recognize in other instances. Perhaps it might be said rather, that the apostle gives us three distinct cycles of thought, which form in their combination a beautiful picture of truth, and a cumulative application of the main line of instruction. For example, God is light (1:5), hence fellowship with God depends on our walking in the light. Again, God is righteous (2:29), hence fellowship with God depends on our doing righteousness. And finally, God is love (4:7-8), hence fellowship with God depends on our possessing and manifesting love.

INTRODUCTION (1:1-4)

In the introduction, three thoughts are set before us concerning the apostleship of Christ, which may be thus expressed:

1. The proofs of the apostleship, specifically: to have seen and heard Christ (v. 1);
2. The character of the apostleship, namely: the declaration of Christ (v. 2);
3. The object of the apostleship, fellowship in Christ (vv. 3-4).

What peculiar expressions in the opening chapter of John's Gospel are recalled by the first verse? What bearing has this upon the statement that the Gospel was first written? Against which of the heresies, previously mentioned, do these words seem directed? How does the Revised Version translate verse 2, especially the phrase "that eternal life"? Against which of the heresies does these words, as given in the RV, seem directed?

FIRST CYCLE OF THOUGHT (1:5-2:28)

What is the first message that John declares to them (v. 5)? If "God is light," how is fellowship to be maintained with Him (vv. 6-7)? If fellowship is to be maintained by walking in the light, how may we walk in the light?

1. By perceiving and confessing sin in the faith of Jesus Christ (1:8-2:2);
2. By keeping God's commandments (vv. 3, 8);
3. Especially the commandment of love to the brethren (vv. 9, 11);
4. This keeping of God's commandments is incompatible with the love of the world (vv. 15-17);
5. It is incompatible with the fellowship of false teachers (vv. 18-28).

Notice how this last corroborates the remarks concerning the nature of the heresies in John's time. Notice the peculiar title ascribed to Christ in verse 20. How does this verse and verse 27 harmonize with ~~516~~ John 15:6, and ~~412~~ Acts 2:32-33? What then is the unction believers have received from Christ?

QUESTIONS

1. To what churches probably was this epistle addressed?

2. Why is its origin dated later than the fourth Gospel?
3. Name and define the three classes of heretics in mind.
4. State the theme and the manner of its treatment.
5. Give the main outline.
6. How may we walk in the light?

1 JOHN 2:29-4:6 — GOD IS RIGHTEOUS

The second cycle centers around the thought that God is righteous (vv. 2-29); hence, fellowship with God depends on doing righteousness.

In the working out of the proposition the apostle speaks of three things:

- (1) The motive for doing righteousness: the hope we have through our sonship to God (3:1-10);
- (2) The test of doing righteousness: love to the brethren (3:11-18); and
- (3) The reward of doing righteousness: assurance of salvation (3:19-4:6).

Referring more at length to the "motive," notice that our sonship to God includes likeness to Christ in His manifested glory (v. 2). Notice that the evidence of the sonship is bound up with expectation of His coming, and the holiness of living it begets (v. 3). Verses 3-8 continue the thought of Christ's holiness, and His work on the Cross to make it possible in our experience. Verse 9, has presented difficulty to some. "Whosoever is born of God," is taken by many to refer only to the new nature in the believer which does not sin. Others interpret the word "commit" in the sense of practice (compare ~~RV~~ Galatians 5:21 RV). It is one thing to fall temporarily into sin as a consequence of sudden temptation, and another thing to practice it, i.e., to live in continual transgression. This no regenerated man does. The teaching of this verse should be balanced with that of 1:8, where the apostle is speaking to the same persons as in the present instance.

Referring to the "test" of doing righteousness, it is peculiar that brotherly love should be insisted on again as in the case of walking in the light. But it will be found to have an equally prominent place in the third cycle of thought, thus stamping this epistle as peculiarly the epistle of love. It

speaks of God's love toward us and our love toward Him, but either side of that truth with John always runs into the corresponding one of love toward one another in Christ. Notice what hinders the flow of this love (v. 12). Notice its importance as demonstrating our spiritual condition (v. 14). Notice the spiritual application of the sixth commandment (v. 15). Notice the practical way this love should be demonstrated (vv. 16-18).

Referring to the "reward" of righteousness as consisting in the assurance of salvation, notice the number of times and the different relations in which that word "know" is employed. This is the "assurance" epistle all the way through as well as the epistle of love, and it is more than a coincidence that these two things go together. See how assurance of salvation depends upon our having a good conscience and a warm heart in Christ (vv. 19-21). See how this assurance carries with it a corresponding assurance in prayer (vv. 22-24). See, again, that this is the evidence of the abiding life in Christ (v. 24), and that just in the measure in which we are pleasing our Heavenly Father as Jesus did, will we receive the witness of the Holy Spirit to that fact as he did. Finally the Christian who thus lives obediently has his assurance increased in the testimony to his overcoming of temptation. He will not be carried away by false doctrines or deceived by any antichrist (4:1-6).

QUESTIONS

1. How is the thought of this lesson worked out?
2. How would you interpret 3:9?
3. What peculiar stamp is on this epistle?
4. What name might be given it from another point of view?
5. What lessons are here taught about assurance?

1 JOHN 4:7-5:21 — GOD IS LOVE

What is the third characteristic of God which John reveals (vv. 7-8)? If, then, God is love, How is fellowship to be maintained with Him (same verses)? In the working out of the thought that fellowship with God is maintained by experiencing and exercising love, notice:

1. how His love was particularly manifested toward us (vv. 9-10);

2. how our love toward Him should be manifested (vv. 11-12);
3. how such love implies fellowship (vv. 13-16);
4. how it effects our spiritual life, begetting assurance (vv. 17-18);
5. how its absence destroys fellowship (vv. 19-21);
6. how the experience and exercise of love is only another aspect of walking in the light and doing righteousness (5:1-4);
7. that the basis and source of this love, is faith in Christ (vv. 5-12).

In conclusion, note how many things we may thus know (vv. 13, 15, 18-20). A simpler outline of this last division which some might prefer is:

- (1) the reason for love, God's love toward us (4:9-11);
- (2) the source of love, God's dwelling in us (4:12-16);
- (3) the rest or confidence of love, boldness in the day of judgment (4:17-19); and
- (4) the fruit of love, loving the brethren (4:20-5:12).

The conclusion of the epistle (vv. 13-21) is easily to be interpreted in the light of what has preceded it.

QUESTIONS

1. can you name the seven divisions of the first treatment of this lesson?
2. Can you name the four divisions of the second treatment?
3. Have you considered all the things which the Christian may know?
4. Do you appreciate why John is called the apostle of love?