

Supporting Notes & Questions

Read the New Testament in a Year

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1 John

Author

The author is widely accepted to be John son of Zebedee, the apostle and author of John's Gospel, who was also first cousin of Jesus, a fisherman and "the disciple whom Jesus loved."

Purpose

John's first letter was written primarily to counter an early form of Gnostic heresy which was creeping into the life of the church by teachers John dubs, "false prophets." The central teaching of this heresy was that the spirit is entirely good, matter entirely evil; that Jesus only became divine at his baptism and that divinity left him before his death; that he rose only in spirit, not bodily form. The purpose of the letter was to expose these false teachers and to criticize their lack of morality; to give assurance of salvation and to give eye witness testimony to the incarnation of Jesus. 1 John is classified as a "General Letter", a sort of circular letter sent to Christians in a number of places, probably in this case those in the province of Asia.

1 John 1

Note the striking similarity in the opening chapter to the start of John's Gospel. What same words or phrases do you recognize? What do you think this signifies? Specifically, look and dwell on the phrases "Word of life", "walking in the light" and "walking in the darkness." What do these phrases mean personally to you today? In what sense is Jesus your "Word of life"? When do you walk in the light, when do you walk in the darkness?

Look at verse 8-10. Probably included at this point because the Gnostics denied their immoral actions were sinful. What does this tell us about the importance of confession of sins now?

1 John 2

Note John's style, especially the use of repetition. At times more reminiscent of a meditation or hymn and very different to the scholarly theological arguments of Paul's letters.

John expands on the themes touched on in chapter 1. "Truth", "Walking in the light" involves being obedient to Christ, "doing what he commands", most notably manifested by loving one's brother.

Look at v24. Note the echoes from John's Gospel, especially chapters 15 and 17 (abide, remain in me etc). Note also, v25, "the promise of eternal life." Why do you think it was important for the recipients to hear that assurance? What does "eternal life" mean to you today?

1 John 3

Verses 1-3, yet more echoes of John's Gospel chapter 1!!!!

Verses 4 – 10 John puts forward the test of whether a person really is born of God. If born of God, they will not continue to sin; they will do what is right and will love their brother. We have to take care not to misinterpret this. John is not asserting "sinless perfection" here, as appears at first glance; rather, he is explaining that the believer's life is characterized not by sin but by doing what is right. Phew!!!

Verses 11 -24 John expands on this. To do right is to love our brother. But how? Jesus is our template. We love as he loved us. Check out v17 for a practical application as to how this should manifest. Yep! Bottom line then and now – love for brother involves answering need by sharing what we have.

Verse 18 A Mission Statement for ours and any church - "**Let us not love with words or tongue, but with actions and in truth.**"

Verse 23 What two commands are we to obey? How do these compare to the 2 commandments Jesus talks about in the gospels.

1 John 4

Verses 1 – 6 "Test the spirits." A warning that believers need to be discerning. The "false prophets" can be very persuasive and what they say may make sense – but there are certain lines drawn in the sand. For John whether a spirit was speaking truth from God was determined by whether Christ was acknowledged to "have come in the flesh." What lines of truth do we as a church and as individuals today feel need to be drawn in the sand? Is there a danger that we can go too far in either direction? Too prescriptive and picky over every article of faith, and we risk becoming pharisaic in our approach, writing off anyone who does not agree with

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our viewpoint as non-Christian or in some way inferior to us. Equally, not everything goes and particularly where there are conflicting views, we have to plump for the truth we hold to. But how much to judge or hold others to account who hold the differing viewpoint to us? Can we agree to disagree on everything? If not where does that leave us as a Church? A relevant question for us in the Methodist Church currently.

Verses 7 – 21 The Merrygoround of Love. Love comes from God, but it is a gift given to be passed on so “let us love one another.” We love because God first loved us. The true test for us today as back in John’s day is whether we love or not. “Whoever lives in love, lives in God, and God in him.” We might not agree on every theological point, but we can perhaps agree on that.

1 John 5

Verses 1 – 12 “Faith in the Son of God.” Back to another line in the sand for John, belief that the man Jesus is the divine Christ, contrary to what the Gnostics were saying. Only belief that Jesus is Son of God will give victory over the world. What do you think the “world” means in this context? What does that mean for us today?

Note the three testimonies to the truth – Spirit, water and blood. What do you think is the relationship between them?

What does John mean in verse 10 and 11 by “testimony in the heart?” What is God’s testimony in your heart today? What does “eternal life” mean to you? Which bit of verse 11 is the more important to you; the fact that God’s gift of life is eternal (whatever that means), or that it is “in his Son?”

Verses 13 – 21 Concluding remarks, a sort of summary of what has gone before, but with an odd downbeat ending.

As if he hasn’t said it enough already, in verse 13 John again underlines a key reason for writing, that the readers who believe in the Son of God may know that they have eternal life. Blessed assurance and all that! We may approach God in confidence, because of Jesus.

Verse 14 – the importance of prayer.

Verses 18-20 three striking statements, affirming the truths “we know.” And summarising some of the letter’s major themes.

A good place to end, you might think, but no he goes on.....ending with the slightly odd warning to keep away from idols. Odd perhaps that he ends abruptly on this negative, but in the cultural context of the time and place John was writing in, very relevant. What modern day “idols” do you think we need to be wary of today?