

A Study of I John

An Anglican Scripture Study



Introduction & Chapter I

Introduction: An Apostle's Testament

1. Author - Anonymous, but regarded by tradition as from the hand of St. John "the Evangelist", one of the sons of Zebedee in the Gospels. Confirmed especially by St. Polycarp, one of St. John's disciples, c.150. Similarities of language, style, and theology connect it with the Fourth Gospel, suggesting the same author.
2. Date & Context – The first of three "letters" written from Ephesus near the end of the apostle's life, possibly after his exile on Patmos around the years 95-96. The letter was written during a time of increased persecution from the Roman Empire, and the threat of heresy within the Christian churches.
3. Structure & Content – Although called an epistle, I John is more likely a treatise or sermon as opposed to an actual letter. Like his Gospel, there is a clear prologue (1:1-4), a short epilogue (5:13), and an appendix (5:14-21). There is also no clear specific audience targeted (unlike the following two epistles), but just St. John's general audience in his diocese of Asia Minor. St. John also likely kept the content for a wide audience to encourage broad circulation. I John is a polemic against false teachers and former church members, but presented in a pastoral and positive way to protect and reassure the next generation in its faith. John's exhortations and testimonies cover the span of his vocation from his early calling to the present challenges of the first-century church.
4. Message – Although I John was probably composed during a time of crisis within the Church, the apostle does more address the current issues. He weaves Christological, ecclesiological and spiritual overtones to illuminate both genuine doctrine and appropriate praxis among believers. Furthermore, St. John definitely places great importance on the witness of his apostolic ministry as a surety for his reader's fidelity and behavior. Most of the themes of I John are derived from the Gospel, so St. John is certainly implying that the survival of the churches will depend on their acceptance of his testimony and their trust in future clergy who will uphold his teaching and ministry.

Reading and Applying I John

I John is a timeless appeal to examine the authenticity of our faith and growth in discipleship. Christians will gain the most benefit from its content if we submit ourselves to maturing in the spiritual realities and moral/ethical admonishments he discusses. I John is as practical as it is transcendental. St. John deftly weaves together key Christological dogmas and the mystical aspects of our relationship with God, and everyday advice about treating one another, combatting sin, and experiencing forgiveness. St. John especially wants us to us, his readers to convert, concentrating on the following themes:

1. Faith in Jesus Christ, His eternal Sonship and His Incarnation
2. Communion with God, through true knowledge and obedience to His commandments
3. Love, both as an attribute of God, and as a living charity to maintain community
4. Divine filiation, giving us a new identity in God, and a transformed way of living in the world

Chapter 1

(vss. 1-4): The Incarnation and It's Implications

[v. 1] That which was from the beginning...heard...seen...looked upon...touched....

1. The similarities with the Gospel Prologue are unmistakable. John is describing, from his own personal testimony, how the Incarnate Word represents the dawning of a new age. God's final revelation in Jesus Christ is, in reality, *another genesis*. "That which was from the beginning" recreates the world in His own person, what St. Irenaeus called "recapitulation." Christ redeems the old order and inaugurates a new one.
2. The Incarnation is *concrete*. Contra docetism, which denied the reality of the Word become flesh, John makes dogmatic Jesus full humanity. This is the crucial link between the apostolic witness and preservation of good

doctrine in the face of Gnostic heresy. Christian truth is not something esoteric, but based on the witness of an historic fact.

[v. 2] ...the life was manifested...we have seen and bear witness...

1. The first “paradox” of I John: infinite life is exhibited in the form of finite life. This would have seemed a metaphysical impossibility to Greco-Romans, but John commends it as the great mystery of the faith.
2. Note here that eternal life is not speaking about further life after death, but a distinct *kind* of life or mode of existence unlike our own. It is the life *of* God and *in* God. Recall here the Creed: “God of God....” The Life coexistent with the Father is unveiled before the world.

[v. 3] ...have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

1. Christian fellowship is not fundamentally based on good will or even a common cause, but on doctrinal reality. The Incarnation invites believers into communion with God which occurs within the Church as sacramental fellowship (esp. Holy Communion). The Life of God, John indicates, becomes the basis for restoring right relationships. Life with one another is dependent upon our participation in Christ’s life.
2. The second observation literally “fleshes out” the significance of Christianity’s *aesthetic* nature. John’s “imagistic” language conveys that truth is not something abstract but the revelation of something literal that makes an impression on our senses. Our worship should reflect the fact of the Word Incarnate.

[v. 4] ...that your joy may be full.

Here John directly quotes Jesus (St. John 15:11; 16:24; 17:13). Christ’s Incarnation and Atonement frees believers from fear and sorrow, giving them instead joy and peace.

(vss. 5-10) The Light of Being and the Way of Holiness

[v. 5] ...God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

1. The teaching verbalized and embodied by Jesus is the glorious light of the Father that tolerates no evil (darkness). John is not simply drawing an analogy, but making a simultaneously ontological and moral statement: God *is* Light and he is so because he *is* Holiness. Light expresses the radiance of God’s nature. The Orthodox calls this the “divine energies” that Christ himself brought in Incarnate *form* at his Advent (Prologue). Recall again the Creed: “Light of Light....”
2. Morally, Light displays the purity of God’s character which John contrasts with the darkness of fallen humanity in even more detail in the Prologue. God is always True in his ways and his promises; he is perfectly Holy in all his behavior and cannot tolerate the corruption of sin.

[vss. 6-7] ...walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another....

1. John is specifically addressing the erroneous Gnostic teaching on sin. Because Gnosticism denied the possibility of sin in a Christian (psychic vs. gnostic superiority) they treated moral behavior with indifference. John, however, is emphasizing that a Christian united with God, soul and body, cannot ignore the problem of sin if he wants to retain proper communion with God.
2. On the other hand, those that “walk in the light” are willing to have their sins exposed, but seek forgiveness through the intercessory work of Jesus. This is the moral transformation necessary to grow in a perpetual state of conversion towards perfection. Christianity is more than truth believed, but also proved the lives we live. it should be illuminative to all onlookers (see 2 Cor. 3:18).

[vss. 7-9] ...the blood of Jesus Christ...If we confess our sins...he is faithful and just to forgive...

1. Redemption & moral purification is impossible without the blood of Christ from His sacrifice at Calvary.
2. John stresses that a denial of sin misunderstands the nature of Christian sinlessness. In this life, “perfection” represents a state of hatred for sin and a love and desire for growth in righteousness; it anticipates one’s complete transfiguration in the eternal state.
3. Sanctification requires an honesty before God that growth entails a degree of struggle: constant repentance and an active conversion. Salvation is not just “once and done,” but a process of new creation.
4. Progress demands remorse! Christians must be willing to acknowledge their misdeeds and humbly ask for the grace of Christ’s priestly intercession on our behalf. This is why we have the sacrament of confession—to admit our wrongdoing and receive God’s absolution through his minister. If we are sincere, God is faithful to forgive and purify, not based on our efforts, but Christ’s merits.

[v. 10] ...we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

Even further, John accentuates that a denial of sin makes God’s redemptive work fraudulent because he has given us Christ as the means of our forgiveness. Someone who disavows his sinfulness refuses God’s reconciliation and cannot be a true Christian.