

**An Introduction to John's First Letter:
The Epistle of Christian Certainty**

"These things have I written unto you who believe ... that you may know that you have eternal life (5:13)".

"In Him was life and the life was the light of men (John 1:4)."

"...these things have been written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name (John 20:31)."

(John's writings are books that most of us were introduced to when we were learning Kione Greek. His writings are clear and forthright with few unusual constructions. However, the problem that has troubled scholars is how we are to understand the book. There is no settled outline of the book among the scholars evidencing little consensus and an array of approaches to its content. It is the one book that is difficult to outline. Lenski commented, "I have never found the like in all literature.")

I. Introductory Matters:

A. Authorship

Though there is no explicit statement that the Apostle John wrote the epistle, it has been unchallenged from the time of the earliest churchmen until the rise of the Enlightenment in the 18th century.

1. The "we" of 1:1-4 indicates that the writer was among the apostles.
2. The writer seems personally acquainted with the recipients of the letter ("my children," 2:1), thus no need for an introduction.
3. Common themes, phrases, and grammatical constructions connect the gospel with the letter.

The writer, then, is the apostle John, the brother of James, collectively the "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17, John 9:51-55. I take it that they were quick decision makers, sometimes positively and others not so. They, like Peter and Andrew, were fishermen from Bethsaida. In fact, Jesus' mother, Mary, and the Zebedee's mother (Salome) were sisters, making John and Jesus cousins.

B. Date and Place of Writing: Internal data cannot bring any clear conclusions.

1. If the letter was written from Ephesus in Asia Minor where John seems to have later resided, the date is likely late (80s). The argument for a late date is the possible connection with the churches of the Revelation; the epistle does not specifically identify the recipients.

The term “Asia Minor” for modern-day Turkey seems odd to us. The Romans gave it that name because it was their first territory on the East. The last king of Pergamum forfeited his land in 133 BC. The Romans established their capitol in Ephesus for political, economic, and military advantages.

2. If the letter was written prior to John’s departure for Asia Minor, then it was written in the late 60s. The argument for the earlier date is largely, and inconclusively, based on 1:1-4 and 2:19, what appears to be a cohesive apostolic community. Is “from us (2:19)” merely about spurious teachings or is it a departure from the apostolic community? I take it that these were Christian itinerates that claimed apostolic conformity but taught a “higher Christian experience.”

C. Occasion for Writing: The internal evidence suggests that the recipients have been threatened by false teachers (2:18; 4:1, 3) and teachings (2:22; 1:6, 8, 10), hence the several warnings in the book.

1. It seems that the occasion of the writing was the intrusion of itinerant or church members teachers who made the claim that a true knowledge of God and personal sin in our lives are antithetical. If God is holy, and “in Him is no darkness at all” (1:5), how can we be truthful, claiming that we know Jesus when we are not holy in conduct or thought.
2. Thus, false teachers were claiming that Christians were those folks who had arrived at some kind of victory over sin (“if we say we have fellowship with him and walk in darkness,” [1:6]; “if we have no sin,” [1:8]; “if we say we have not sinned,” [1:10]). “I am writing to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you” (2:26).

The errorists could have arisen from within the churches and John heard of them (“they went out from *us* [2:19]) or the *us* meaning the apostle’s teachings. In either case, it was a departure from the apostolic gospel.

It is important in looking further into the book to note what the error was not. It was not about the person of the Lord Jesus or His atoning sacrifice, the grand doctrine of redemption; it was about the accomplishment of our Lord's gift of redemption, the doctrine of sanctification (the two great doctrines are intertwined, one defining the other, the accomplishments of Christ and the provision of Christ to walk in Him).

The error concerns the doctrine of sanctification. Does Christ's redemptive mercies make our daily walk with God more than what we are experiencing? Is there a step that we are not taking advantage of in our daily walk (It would look something like this: redemptive forgiveness in the past, a second appropriation of Christ's redemption now, a glorious final redemption in the future). Is Christ's initial forgiveness sufficient, even in a broken state, to arrive at our final redemption? Are we missing a second insightful experience that puts personal sin in the past entirely?

3. As believers in John's acquaintance investigated their oft-imperfect lives, their confidence was shattered. Maybe these teachers are right? Could this be apostolic teaching? The net effect was troubled saints. If I do things that I should not and God's standard of acceptance is His own perfect character, how can I be a Christian? False teachers taught that there was a time in the Christian's experience where they rise above sin. The Ephesians recognized the error (2:6), the church at Pergamum embraced it (2:15), as did the church at Thyatira (2:20) most likely He addressed a group within the two churches identifying them as "Nicolaitians." **Nicolaitians taught a doctrine of moral freedom that stood in contrast to Christ's character and teaching, the sins of Balaam and Jezebel. They taught a compromise with the pagan, idolatrous culture by redefining sin and, thus, Christian virtue. Becoming a Christian means being set free from sin, actions no longer have negative moral value. See 2:14-15, 20. Such "apostles" are false (2:2).**
4. The question in the letter is this one: how can we have assurance that we are God's children since we are imperfect creatures? Is a perfected state possible before our final redemption? How can we know this? If knowing God is not about getting it right, what is it about? Assurance of knowing God is not in our perverted dreams of illusive obedience; it is in the object of our faith and in the fact that we are not what we were though there is room to grow. The root problem can be stated this way: every error in teaching among believers emanates from a misunderstanding of the accomplishments of Christ!

- D. The Theme: In 104 verses the word “know” occurs 40 times. Two Greek words are used, but the lines of distinction between them are not clear. In addition, two phrases appear, the former repeatedly.

“By this we know” (2:3, 5; 3:19,24; 4:6, 13; 5:2).

“By which we know” (2:18).

This letter has rightly been called, “the epistle of Christian certainty” (5:13).

Also, the above are rough synonyms; they relate to life. Darkness characterizes the person who is ignorant of the apostles’ doctrine of walking with God.

- E. Key concepts in the Writing:

“Word of Life” or “life-giving word”(1:1)

“Eternal Life” (1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20).

“Abides” (2; 6, 24, 27, 28; 3:6, 9, 14; 3:15, 24; 4:12, 13, 15).

“Fellowship” (1:3, 6, 7).

“Light” (1:5, 7; 2:8, 9).

“Believe” (3:23; 4: 16; 5: 1, 5, 10, 13).

“Darkness” 1:5, 6; 2:8, 9).

Also, the six above are rough synonyms; they relate to life. Darkness characterizes the person who is ignorant of the apostles’ doctrine of walking with God.

- F. The Outline: “The Epistle of Christian Certainty (5:13)”.

I. Introduction 1:1-4

II. The Reality of Fellowship Stated 1:5-2:2

III. The Reality of Fellowship Tested 2:3-5:20

A. The Test of Obedience 2:3-17

B. The Test of Perseverance 2:18-29

C. The Test of Purity 3:1-4:6

D. The Test of Love 4:7-21

E. The Test of Faith 5:1-20

IV. Conclusion 5:21

II. The introduction 1:1-4

(It is striking that this book lacks the features of a personal letter or an epistle. There is no statement of authorship, authority, salutation or greeting, or prayer [though it is found in II & III John]. The gospel, however, is much like I John in this regard.)

- A. These verses can be outlined as follows:
- vv. 1a-d: the testimony of the apostles, something about Him.
 - v. 1e: the preaching of the apostles, the focus on Him.
 - v. 3: the experience of the apostles, the reality of life in Him.
 - v. 4: the purpose of the apostles: the fellowship with God, the joy of the apostles.
- B. Vv. 1-3 is a single sentence composed of four dependent clauses in verse 1 (“what”), a parenthesis in verse 2, and the main verb in verse 3 (“we proclaim”).
- C. In verse 1a-d “What” or “that which” introduces four dependent clauses. In gender they are neuter, not masculine (“the one who”), telling us that the words or phrases refer to something about the subject, not the subject. John’s desire to focus on something about Christ; He is the origin of spiritual life.
- D. Verse 1e tells us what they observed over three years with Jesus indicating that it formed the content of their message (life).
- E. The repetition of the same words in three consecutive verses (1-3), such as “from the beginning,” “heard,” “seen,” “contemplated,” and “our hands have handled” is intended to emphasize the authority of first-hand knowledge (one of John’s literary technics is the use of repetition).
- “Beginning” means from the very first time “we” (the apostles) met Him.
 - “Heard” means the hearing of His message.
 - “Seen” means the observation of His works or miracles.
 - “Beheld our hands have handled” suggests intimacy of contact; what they reflected upon about Him.
- The essence of what they saw in Him (v. 4) was “the Word of life” or that He was the life-giver. It means the message about life. See John 1:4, “In Him was life and the life was the light of men”.
- F. Simply put, it is a message. Verse 2 is a parenthesis that John uses to emphasize the point of verse 1. What John desires to describe. Is something about Jesus. The life seen in Christ was eternal life; it was a message; and it is the life Jesus revealed that is from and in the Father. Jesus came from heaven to reveal to us the life of the Father. It explains how the apostles heard the message they are seeking to communicate; they proclaimed it?
- G. The purpose of reporting what the apostles learned from Christ is that the reader might enter it (v. 4). Fellowship, life, abide, and eternal life are synonyms. These words suggest union with Christ. Fellowship suggests not only entrance into life, but all of life from spiritual birth to glory. It is the common participation in the grace of God that we shared.

Not only they “proclaim” the message; they “wrote” about it (v. 4). These two verbs capsulize the introduction (vv. 1-4).

- H. In verse 4, it cannot be determined whether we should read the line as “your joy” or “our joy.” Clearly, one of John’s purposes in writing is to promote joy, joy spring from the wonder of forgiveness.
- I. This “joy” has to do with the delight and comfort in the gospel that is what the apostle’s see as eternal life and fellowship. It is a joy that will only reach its fullness in heaven, the place of perfect love. It is not the delusive “joy” the “I did it right,” but that “He” did it right and forever so!!

Applications

1. It tells us that Jesus was far more than a wise moralist. If Jesus was not God, how could He come from God (“with the Father,” v. 2) and not be God manifested. How could one who is God provide a conditional redemption? Infinity can act in conformity to itself (holy, righteous, true, compassionate). God cannot act contrary to His character! If God accomplishes something is there anything left to do except bask in the enjoyment of it?
2. The essence of Christ’s work on the earth was to reveal to us the life of God so that we might participate in it. He came to reveal eternal life.
3. The apostles listened and experienced that life and have faithfully passed it on in their spoken words and writings. They did not make up their message; it came from God through Christ.
4. There is great joy and comfort in the possession of eternal life. Joy is eternal life expressed daily in each of us as we contemplate the wonder and completeness of what He accomplished.
5. Though we cannot see or hear Him, as the apostles were privileged to do, we can still meditate on the wonder of Him. Such activity can be a source of great joy and comfort.
6. Sadly “joy” in this life is, often determined by cultural values presented thru the media or other sources (“You deserve a break today,” a hamburger-joint commercial). While we do not denigrate “joys” they should not overshadow our eternal joy. Temporal joys are wonderful if you see them as a picture of the delights of our eternal home.
7. If He came to reveal life to the apostles and sent the apostles to us as well with instructions, we are obligated to pass it to others. This is true apostolic succession!