

# A Study of 1 John

## Background for the Study

*For Jews Demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.  
(1 Corinthians 1:22-24)*

These words of God, given through the apostle Paul, describe extremely well the situation that occurred as the gospel spread into regions influenced by various pagan philosophies, especially as it drew the interest of people with an overly intellectual focus. The Bible is not an un-intellectual book, but it eminently practical and has a very narrow focus – the salvation of mankind. As a result, it deals with how to avoid evil and correct its ill effects, not where evil comes from; It is concerned with how to establish a relationship with God, not the exact nature of God relative to God's creation; It discusses avoiding the temptation of the flesh, not why the flesh is tempting. In short, it didn't have enough "theory" to satisfy pagan (and especially Greek) speculation.

In the Bible, evil is defined in opposition to God's will. It is always an act of free-will which chooses to forsake dependence upon God [ISBE volume II, p. 488.] Similarly, a sin is simply an act against God's law (1 John 3:4.) Such a lack of "sophistication" is very different from the pagan philosophies of the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D. which looked at the imperfection of the world as opposed to the perfection of divinity and drew a sharp distinction between them. To pagan minds the world and divinity were completely incompatible. Variations on this idea were found in Greek Platonic thought, Persian Zoroastrianism, and even early Buddhism. As these philosophies developed, they also promoted the idea that the physical was the actual source of evil.

But, if physical matter is totally evil and the spiritual is totally good (the argument continued,) then how can one have anything to do with the other? Furthermore, if matter is inherently evil, then how can anything my body does affect my spirit, and how can my spirit ultimately change my physical actions for the better? Such musings posed a direct challenge against the truth of God's word. Consider:

- 1) If the perfect can't be associated with the imperfect, then the perfect God couldn't be the creator of the imperfect world;
- 2) If the perfect can't be associated with the imperfect, then Jesus couldn't really be both God and man;
- 3) If the physical was inherently evil, and the spiritual inherently good, then nothing my body can do can affect my spirit – i.e. I can "sin" and it won't affect my spiritual relationship with the perfect God;
- 4) If my physical body is inherently evil then the only way to stop bad acts is to mistreat the body that commits those Acts (Colossians 2:21-23, 1 Timothy 4:3.)

Finally, if the purpose of religion is no longer to provide a way to forgive sin (which doesn't really mean anything to the spiritual,) what is it for? The answer posed by

the philosophers was that religion was to provide the knowledge to escape from the natural existence to pure spiritual life. Since this escape couldn't be seen (after all, an evil body can only do evil things,) it had to be a purely internal escape. And being internal, it had to be a result of direct, special "knowledge." This made "special knowledge" more important than faith based on God's revealed will and inevitably separated those "gifted" with said knowledge and those who weren't, resulting in a decrease of love within God's family.

Unfortunately, man's tendency to meld religious ideas from different sources is almost universal. As examples consider: Aaron and the golden calf (Exodus 32), the worship of the snake (2 Kings 18), the co-opting of Pagan holidays as "Christian" holidays (Christmas and Easter for example) and their spread from denomination to denomination, even the growth of Hanukkah in the mostly "Christian" United States. Such a blending between the pagan ideas discussed in previous paragraphs and Christianity occurs in a big way in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries but, according to early "church" writers, it was already occurring in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century.

These early writings tell us of a man by the name of Cerinthus who was a false teacher in Asian Minor who was in conflict with John. He is said to have taught that the world was not created by a supreme God, but by an inferior power. He is also said to have taught that Jesus was the physical son of Joseph and Mary upon whom the spirit of God descended after the baptism and from whom he left before the crucifixion. 1 John combines teaching against this doctrine, teaching against the idea that sin is only of the physical, and a strong plea for the superiority of the knowledge that God supplies only by his revelation into a strong defense of the basis for Christianity.

## **Specifics for the Book**

*Written by:* John the apostle, the brother of James

Almost all credible scholarship points this work to John the apostle even though there is no internal testimony to that effect. However, the author of the book claims to be an eyewitness to the appearance of Jesus the Christ (1 John 1:1-4), which means he was at least a close associate with the apostles, if not an apostle himself. In addition, similarities between this book and the gospel of John, which does claim apostolic authority (John 21:20ff,) and is generally attributed to John the apostle himself, make it very likely that the author of both books is the same. In addition, the surviving works of 2<sup>nd</sup> century "church Fathers," almost universally attribute this work to John the apostle.

*Written to:* Those that believe (1 John 5:13)

*Written from:* Most likely Ephesus (if early histories and dates are correct.)

*Written when:* 60 – 90's (probably 90 – 95)

Once again there is no internal evidence on which to base a date. However, early writers mention a particular false teacher named Cerinthus who was an opponent of John's at Ephesus in the late 1<sup>st</sup> century. Cerinthus' reported false doctrines show a remarkable similarity to some of the false teaching attacked in this letter. In addition, the similarity of the false doctrines attacked and the 2<sup>nd</sup> – 3<sup>rd</sup> century heresy called Gnosticism, an early form of which began to infiltrate the church late in the 1<sup>st</sup> century,

also argues for a late 1<sup>st</sup> century date. The most common date given is 90-95 A.D., but some (who also argue for an early date to John's gospel) give a date as early as the 60's.

### *Written Why?*

The apostle himself tells his readers why he is writing to them: he was writing to “complete” their joy (1:4), to “keep them from sin (2:1)”, to encourage them to love their brothers (2:7-11), and so they would “know that you have eternal life (5:13).” In doing so, he unleashes the full weight of apostolic authority against false doctrines concerning the person, nature and work of Jesus the Christ and against falsehoods concerning the nature of sin and righteousness. he also emphasizes the connection between a right relationship with God, obedience to His word, and love for fellow members of God's family. Finally, he emphasizes that true knowledge comes only from the revelation of God, is available to all who accept his word equally, and requires acknowledgment of Jesus as the son of God.

## **Structure of the Study**

To me, 1 John reads more as a series of short sermons or meditations on topics that his readers need to understand, than a unified single argument. In this, it is much like the book of James. It does not (in my opinion) lend itself very well to a linear outline. But, there are many who have tried and at least partially succeeded in creating one. If you want to see what other people have done to outline the book, please look at a good general reference work such as the International Standard Bible Encyclopedia or a reliable study Bible. In my opinion however, the best outlines remain those personally created by the student who will use them. I urge you to create your own.

Although I have a problem finding an outline of 1 John that I think “works” for me, it is fairly easy to divide the book into a collection of loosely related topical arguments. As such, we'll use the following divisions to guide our study.

- The reality of Jesus the Christ (1:1-4)
- The reality of sin (1:5-9)
- Christ – the real solution for real sin (2:1-6)
- Walking in the light requires loving our brethren (2:7-14)
- The love of the father is incompatible with the love of the world (2:15-17)
- Complete and true knowledge comes from God's anointing (2:18-27)
- Abiding in Him accomplishes ... (2:28-3:10)
- Children of God love one another (3:11-18)
- Confidence before God is achievable (3:19-24)
- How to tell truth from error (4:1-6)
- Love in practice (4:7-12)
- Fundamental truths (5:1-5)
- Testimony about the son (5:6-12)
- Confidence yields fruit (5:13-21)

I urge everyone to read this text as many times as possible during this study. The more you read it, the easier it is to see the connections.

[Significant information in the preceding introductory notes is derived from International Standard Bible Encyclopedia (ISBE) articles on John, the epistles of John, and Gnosticism.]

## Questions to Provoke Thought

### *The reality of Jesus the Christ (1 John 1:1-4)*

1. What does John proclaim (v. 3)?  
Why does he proclaim it to the recipients of his letter?  
What additional fellowship is involved in fellowship with John?
2. What phrases does John use to emphasize the truth concerning his proclamation of Life?  
  
Why do you think that John uses these phrases?
3. What does John mean by “that which was from the beginning?”
4. What is “the word of life?”  
Explain your answer.

In what way was the “life made manifest?”

Through whom was it made manifest?

5. What is “the eternal life which was with the father?”
6. In these verses, what is seen as central to our fellowship with God?

### *The reality of Sin (1 John 1:5-9)*

1. What message did John proclaim concerning God?  
From who had they heard this message?  
What does the phrase “God is light” represent?  
  
What is the characteristic of God’s light?
2. What do we do when we claim God’s fellowship, but walk in darkness?
  - a.
  - b.Why is this claim a lie?
3. What are the benefits of walking in the light?
  - a.
  - b.Who or what defines the character of the light we walk in?  
What is the only source of cleansing for sins?
4. What is true if we deny our sins?

5. What happens if we confess our sins?  
What characteristics are shown by God when He forgives our sins?
6. What is true if we say we have not sinned?
7. What is the connection between walking in the light, confessing our sins, and fellowship?

*Christ – the real solution for real sins (1 John 2:1-6)*

1. What was John’s purpose in writing “these things?”
2. What do we have if we do sin?  
Who is our advocate?  
What is an advocate?  
How has he advocated for us?
3. What is propitiation?  
For whose sins has Christ made propitiation?  
If Christ made propitiation for the sins of the whole world, why isn’t everyone saved?
4. How do we know that we have “come to know him?”  
What is the connection between “knowing Christ” and gaining the benefits of the propitiation?
5. What is true of those who claim to “know” Christ but don’t keep his commandments?
6. What is true of those who keep his word?  
What do you think it means to “perfect” the love of God?  
Why do you think it means this?
7. How do we know we are in Him?  
What does “abiding” in him mean we ought to do?
8. Describe in your own words the interrelationships between knowing Christ, keeping Christ’s commandments, being the one in whom God’s love is perfected, abiding in Christ, and walking like Christ?

*Walking in the light requires loving your brethren (1 John 2:7-14)*

1. What is the apostle writing to his readers?  
What is he not writing?  
What is the old commandment?
2. What is this commandment “on the other hand (NASB)” or “again (KJV)?”  
What makes it a new command also?  
  
How does the true light shine?
3. What is true if we say we’re in the light and we hate our brother?  
What is true about our dwelling place when we love our brother?  
When we love our brother, what is true about our walk?
4. What things are true about us when we hate our brother (3 things?)

What do these 3 things say about our relationship to God?

5. What things are involved in loving (not hating) our brother?  
(Be prepared to discuss your ideas.)
6. To whom does John write in 2:12-14?

What does he write to them?

7. Given the background of this book, what is he trying to emphasize in 2:12-14

*The love of the Father is incompatible with loving the world (1 John 2:15-17)*

1. What are we not to love (2 things?)  
Define these terms.

What is true when we love the world?

2. What are the three things “in the world” specifically mentioned in 2:16?  
For each of these items, define and give an example.

Where are these things from?

Where are these things not from?

3. What happens to those who do the will of God?

What is true of the world?

4. Find a scripture in the Sermon on the Mount that illustrates John’s point in this text.

5. How does 1 John 2:15-17 help you in your walk with Christ?

*True knowledge comes from God’s anointing (1 John 2:18-26)*

1. What does John mean when he says it is the “last hour?”

In this “hour,” what have come?

Of what did their coming provide knowledge?

2. How could the readers of this letter tell that those who left were not a part of God’s family?

Who is the “us” in vs. 19? Why?

3. What does the anointing of the Holy One provide?

To whom did it provide this?

4. What was the character of the knowledge provided?

What was not a part of this knowledge?

5. In this context, how is a liar defined?

What else does John call these liars?

What do these people deny?

6. Who has the father?

What is John emphasizing in vs. 23?

How will we ensure that we will abide in the Son and in the Father?

7. What had John's readers heard from the beginning?  
What was the result of holding to what they had heard?

8. What caused John to write to these Christians?  
List the characteristic benefits of their anointing?

What is the key need that the anointing met (and still meets?)

What must be true of the anointing in order to get its benefits?  
What did the anointing teach them?

9. What is the anointing in this context? Why?

*Abide in Christ – with confidence (1 John 2:28-3:10)*

1. What teaches us to abide in Him?  
What benefit do we have from abiding in Him?  
Why is this benefit important?

2. What is the connection between being “born of Him” and “abiding in Him?”

What characteristic is true of those who have been “born of Him?”

Why do they have this characteristic?

3. What does John call those to whom he is writing (3:1)?

By what means have we been made children of God?  
What does this mean about our relationship with the world?

4. What has not “yet” appeared?  
What do we know will happen when God appears?  
Why is this going to happen?  
What does the hope that we will be like Him when He appears lead us to do?

How does our “hope” strengthen our relationship with God now?

Note: 1 John 3:4-10 discusses the ongoing, habitual practice of sin as opposed to those periodic sins which occur because of our weaknesses or carelessness.

5. What is sin?  
When we practice sinning, what do we practice?

6. For what did Jesus appear (vss. 5, 8)

What is true about Him personally with respect to sin?

7. What is the logical conclusion to our decision to “abide” in Him?

What is true if we continue to practice sin?

8. How do we recognize a righteous person?  
Who does a righteous person imitate?

9. What is true of someone with a habitual practice of sin?

Who does a habitual sinner imitate?

From vs. 8, why does this person have a conflict with the Son of God?

10. What remains in the one “born of God?”  
What does this ensure?

11. How do we distinguish between the children of God and the children of the Devil?

What, if anything is significant about listing love of the brothers separately from practicing righteousness?

12. What is there about this text that would provide confidence in your relationship with Christ?

What benefit do you find in John’s very practical definition of a righteous person?

*Children of God love one another (1 John 3:11-18)*

1. What message had John’s readers heard from the beginning?

From the beginning of what?

2. Who is held up as a counter-example of loving your brother?  
What is said of Cain in verse 12?

Why did he murder his brother?

What does this statement say about the world’s attitude towards us?

3. What does love for the brothers indicate?  
What is true of those who don’t love?  
How is this illustrated in verse 15?

4. What is held up as the supreme example of love?  
How should this example affect us?
5. What is specifically urged in order to illustrate love of our brothers?  
  
How must we love our brethren?  
How must we not love our brethren?
6. Do you find this section of 1 John easy or hard to live out in your life?  
  
Explain your answer?

*Confidence before God is achievable (1 John 3:19-24)*

1. What will allow us to know that we are of the truth?  
What will this do for our heart?  
Why is this necessary?  
  
Why would our heart “condemn” us?
2. What ultimately keeps our heart from condemning us?  
What does it mean when it says “God is greater than our heart, and He knows everything?”
3. What is true if our heart does not condemn us (2 things?)  
  
Why do we receive what we ask from God?  
What is there about keeping commandments that helps reassure our hearts?
4. What does vs. 23 say is the “commandment” that we must keep?  
  
Where else do we find this concept in the Bible?
5. Who abides in God (“him”?)  
Where does God abide?  
What is the evidence that proves God abides in us?
6. Summarize vss. 19-24 in your own words. (use back of sheet)  
How do these verses help you in your walk with God?

*How to tell truth from error (1 John 4:1-6)*

1. What are we to do with the “spirits?” (two things)

Why are we to do this?

What is the meaning of “spirit” in verse 1?

2. How do we know that a spirit is from God?  
In what sense does this allow us to know the Spirit of God?

How do we know a spirit is not from God?

What does it mean to confess Jesus in verse 3?

What does John call the spirit that doesn’t confess Jesus?

3. Why had the “little children” overcome the world?  
What does this say about the nature of God relative to “he” who is in the world?
4. Why does verse 5 say that false teachers get so many converts?
5. Who does the word “we” in verse 6 refer to? Explain your response.

What is true about those that listen to John?

What is true about those who don’t listen to John?

What is known by the reaction to John’s teaching?

6. What can we find in verses 1-6 to help us decide between true and false doctrine?

*Love in Practice (1 John 4:7-21)*

1. Why should we love one another? (two reasons)

What is true about those who don’t love?

Why?

2. How does God demonstrate love?  
What is the benefit to us from God’s love?

3. What defines love?  
Why is it dangerous to define love in our terms?

4. What is the logical conclusion of the fact that God loves us?  
What is the result of loving one another?  
In what way is God's love perfected in us (v. 12?)
5. What told John (and his listeners) that he/they abided in God?  
  
What had been revealed through them?
6. What is necessary to have God abide in us?  
If God abides in us, where do we abide?
7. What is the relationship between Jesus saving the world, our confession of Jesus as God's son, and abiding in God?
8. What have we come to know?  
  
What is God defined as in verse 16?  
What must we abide in to abide in God?  
What does it mean to abide in love?
9. How is love perfected in us (v. 17?)  
What does this give us?  
In what sense are we like him in this world?
10. What is driven out by love?  
Why?  
  
What is true of one who fears?
11. Why do we love?  
What makes those claiming to love God liars?  
  
What is true of those who don't love their brothers and sisters?  
Why?
12. What commandment do we have from the Lord?
13. How does 1 John 4:7-21 help you in your walk with God?

*Fundamental truths (1 John 5:1-5)*

1. What “belief” is necessary for those who have been born of God?  
From previous verses in 1 John (and elsewhere,) what is involved in this belief?

What is true of “everyone” who loves the father?

2. How do we know that we love the children of God?  
How does verse 3 define the love of God?
3. Describe in your own words the connection between belief in Christ, love for god, love for Gods’ children, and obedience to God’s commands.
4. What are God’s commandments “not?”  
Why are they not this thing?  
Through what do we overcome the world?
5. What do verses 4 and 5 say about the connection between faith and being born of God?
6. What does this section of verses say about the connection between Jesus being the Christ, the son of God and our ability to overcome the world?

*Testimony concerning the Son of God (1 John 5:6-12)*

1. What are the three things that testify about Jesus Christ?  
What does each of these testimonies refer to?
2. What does it mean when it says that Jesus Christ came from water and blood?  
  
Why does John emphasize that Jesus came not by water alone?
3. Why should we accept this testimony of god concerning Jesus Christ?  
What must be done with God’s testimony for it to do us any good?  
How do we do this?

4. What do we do when we don't believe God's testimony concerning the savior?  
In what way is this true?
5. What did God give us?  
Where is this gift found?
6. What do verses 11 and 12 say about the connection between salvation and Jesus the Christ?

*Confidence yields fruit (1 John 5:13-21)*

1. What things in verses 13-21 can we be sure of (at least 5?)
2. What can we "know" if we believe in the name of the Son of God?  
Why do we know this?
3. What confidence can we have in prayer?  
What, if any, conditions are there on our prayers?
4. What should we ask God concerning our brother or sister who sins?  
Under what conditions should we ask this?  
What sin does not "lead to death?"
5. Why do those born of God not keep on sinning?  
What is true of such people and "the evil one?"  
  
What does this say about the Christian's position relative to the world?
6. What do we "know" God has given us?  
To what purpose did He give this?
7. In whom are we found?  
What are the characteristics of the "Son Jesus Christ?"  
How will these truths keep us from idols?

WHAT HAVE YOU LEARNED FROM THIS BOOK?

HOW WILL IT HELP YOU TO BE A MORE FAITHFUL CHRISTIAN?

WHAT WILL IT CHANGE IN YOUR EVERYDAY LIFE?