

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 23 – 1 John

John was the youngest of the disciples of Jesus, and he outlived all the others. The New Testament books which bear his name (including his gospel account) were written late in the first century A.D., and, as a result, he was able to describe the burgeoning problem of Gnosticism which was a heresy infiltrating the churches at that time, a heresy which continued to develop well into the second century. The gnostics believed that the spirit was good and the body evil, but that the spirit could escape the evil flesh in which it was encased through an enlightenment of the mind, that is, through a knowledge (gnosis) of what they considered to be the truth.

Gnosticism later developed into two distinct schools of thought. The first school taught that Jesus appeared as a real man, but He did not have a material body. The second school insisted that the spirit of Christ descended on the man Jesus when He was baptized and then left Him shortly before He was crucified. Both views denied (1) the incarnation – the thinking was: A righteous God would never take to Himself an evil body; (2) the union of two natures, divine and human, in the one Person of Jesus Christ – the thinking was: If Jesus was God, how could He die? Or, to put it the other way, If Jesus died, how could He possibly be God? Hence, they also denied (3) the atonement, that Jesus was the appointed Substitute for sinners and could effectively pay the required ransom for others.

There is an emerging Neo-Gnosticism we see today in the twenty-first century. It does not teach that the body is evil, necessarily, but that the spirit can still escape the flesh if it chooses to do so and establish itself with a new identity – for example, it is said that a boy can become a girl if he so wishes (and, similarly, a girl can choose to become a boy if that is how she sees herself) – and why is that? It is not because of any actual transformation which has taken place in the supposed process of transition, however well that might be portrayed physically and embraced psychologically, but because postmodernism denies objective truth, the absolutes of the real world, in favour of subjective preference or “my truth.” Regardless of the form it takes, however, all Gnosticism is willfully humanistic, a fundamental denial of God Himself and of all that He has revealed both in creation and in Holy Scripture.

John wrote against Gnosticism in his gospel account, and he continues to do that in the letter known to us as 1 John. Now, though, he is writing a church which has recently experienced a serious loss of attendees, leaving a small number of true believers who are discouraged, grieving the loss and seriously wondering if they themselves were really right after all. The apostle wants to encourage them, to build them up in faith and hope, and, above all, to establish the vital distinction between truth and error which is itself the difference between life and death.

The purpose of the gospel according to John, as he tells us, was a call to faith, “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). The purpose of the present letter is to establish certainty of faith, “that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God” (1 John 5:13).

There are two points we should note at the outset: (1) Several things are repeated in this letter from one chapter to the next, but a ministry of consolation like this often requires such repetition. (2) Because they were gnostics who walked out on this church, much of what John writes about applies especially to them. That historical context should become clear as we go through this letter.

Chapter 1 begins with a very clear and strong statement on the incarnation, that God really did become flesh and dwell as a man among men. The Lord Jesus did not simply make appearances in the form of a mirage but offered empirical proof that He possessed a material human body, a body which witnesses had heard with their ears, had seen with their eyes and whose hands had touched both before His death and after His resurrection. This is the basis of the fellowship we Christians may have with one another, as well as with the Father and His Son, and knowing it to be so gives us fulness of joy (vv.1-4).

Moreover, this is the message that Jesus Himself had proclaimed, the message that the apostles had declared, and we know it is true for God cannot lie (see Numbers 23:19). There is no darkness in God, and so no one who is consciously walking in sin can have fellowship with God. If we say that we have fellowship with Christ but deny what He has told us, we are liars. But if we testify to what He has told us, the fellowship we have together in Him is genuine and His blood cleanses us from all sin (vv.5-7). To say that we have no sin is to deceive ourselves, but if we confess our sins, which is also to turn right away from them,

the Lord is both faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us of all unrighteousness. Again, to say that we have no sin is to call God Himself a liar, and to do that is to bear witness that we are not in Christ, nor He in us (vv.8-10).

Chapter 2 encourages all who know the Lord not to sin, but, if any such believer does sin, let him be assured that we have in heaven an Advocate with the Father. This Advocate is Jesus Christ the righteous who at Calvary bore the penalty for the unrighteousness of all His people the world over, Jews and Gentiles alike (vv.1,2).

Oh, but how can we be sure if we really know Him? It is by keeping His commandments. Salvation is by faith, not by works, yet the faith that saves is a faith that works, a faith that delights to obey God and to please Him. This is what authenticates it. If someone hates his brother, for example, this shows that he is not in Christ but continues to walk in darkness. The Christian, on the other hand, does not love the things of the world but seeks to do the will of God, showing it by loving his brother, and he is the one who has eternal life (vv.3-17).

John is the only apostle who writes about the Antichrist by name – Paul referred to him as “the man of sin” (2 Thessalonians 2:3) – yet John would have us to know that there are many antichrists in the world, unbelievers generally, and in this case gnostics specifically. These are they who deny the Son of God, and, whether they are aware of it or not, they deny the Father in doing so. The believer has been given the Holy Spirit to help him embrace the truth in Jesus and fight against these opposing influences all around him (vv.18-29).

Chapter 3 celebrates the love of our heavenly Father that Christians should be called children of God, and to see Christ at last will make us fully conformed to His glorious image. Whoever is in Christ does not continue in sin because he has been born of God (vv.1-9).

The children of God and children of the devil are distinguished from one another by how they live their lives, whether they love or hate their brothers, and it should not surprise us if Christians are hated by the unbelieving world because those who hate their brothers are murderers and without eternal life. If Christ laid down His life for us, believer, we ought to lay down our lives for one another. Let us not just talk the talk but walk the walk, and know that this is how assurance of faith is achieved (vv.10-24).

Chapter 4 brings out another distinguishing trait between the children of God and the children of the devil, between those who possess the Holy Spirit and those who possess the spirit of the Antichrist; the difference is not only in life but in confession. Those who confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, and are willing to hear such teaching, are of God, whereas those who deny that, and will not even listen to it, are not of God. Let us then test the spirits, and we do so by examining what is willingly received and confessed by others (vv.1-6).

God has demonstrated His love for sinners by sending His only begotten Son into the world to die for them, to be the one and only sacrifice acceptable to God to achieve their redemption, and if God so loved us, dear Christian, we ought also to love one another (vv.7-11). No one has ever seen God, but, if we love one another, this is the evidence that the Spirit of God lives in us. Love is not afraid, for love casts out fear, and, if we love the Lord, it is because He first loved us. If someone claims to love God but hates his brother, how can he not love his brother whom he has seen and yet love God whom he has not seen? That is a contradiction. If we love the Lord God, we must love our brother also (vv. 7-19).

Chapter 5 picks up on this same theme, that everyone who loves God will also love His people, the apple of His eye whom He has made a new creation in Christ. Keeping the commandments of God is not burdensome to the true believer, for he has been given a faith which overcomes the world. Jesus came among us by water and by blood, which is to say that He baptized and died – not baptized only but also died, offering Himself a ransom for many – and the Spirit of God bears witness to that cleansing and atoning power (vv.1-6).

The witness of God is greater than the witness of men, and this is His testimony, that life is in His Son. He who has the Son of God has life, and he who does not have the Son does not have life. God hears the prayers of those who seek His will, and He answers those who know it to be so. Only they are beyond hope who, having filled their cup of iniquity, are now handed over to their own vile affections (vv.9-21).

Rev. Tom Aicken

