

Decline of Discipline after the Nicene Age

Course Outline

The Tests of Life, Part 1**I John****Introduction to I John****I. Authorship**

- a. First John itself is anonymous but early church tradition claimed its author to be the apostle John.¹⁷⁷ Its style and contents closely match II and III John, and they are relatively close to the Gospel of John as well.¹⁷⁸ The Greek of these documents is among the “easiest” in the New Testament and typifies the *Koine* period. Common themes and terms include life, light, belief, witness, truth, abiding, keeping the commandments, and loving one another.
- b. Papias’ early first-century testimony (quoted by Eusebius in Hist. Eccl. 3.9.3f.), however, states, “I took care to search out according to the words of the elders what Thomas or James or John or Matthew or any other of the disciples of the Lord, and what Aristion and the elder John, the disciple of the Lord, would say. . . .” Some scholars have taken this as a reference to two different Johns, the latter an elder in the church in the early second century and distinct from the group of apostles. This could account for why II John and III John refer to their author simply as “the elder,” but not why early church tradition associated these letters with someone named John.¹⁷⁹
- c. Still other scholars speak of a Johannine school or community which edited the Johannine literature in several stages of redaction. It is plausible to postulate at least some minimal editing to the Gospel, in light of the multiple witnesses mentioned in John 21:24-25. One plausible hypothesis suggests that the Gospel was published just after John died, which would explain the inclusion of 21:20-23 to dispel false rumors about what Christ had promised John.¹⁸⁰ But many theories are far more elaborate than this and rely at best on educated guesswork with few objective constraints in the text.¹⁸¹ It remains defensible to speak at least of the substantial core of the Gospel and

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Epistles as having come from the apostle John.

II. Circumstances

- a. Tradition also identifies the recipients of these letters as the Christian congregations in and around Ephesus toward the end of the first-century (probably in the 90s). The Johannine community clearly is troubled by false teaching, which denies the full humanity of Christ; claims sinless perfectionism; and yet promotes certain lifestyles that transgress the Law. This picture fits early tradition about the Gnostic teacher, Cerinthus, who ministered in and around Ephesus at the same time as the aged apostle. At the very least we seem to be confronted with some form of docetism (from the Greek, *dokeo*, “to seem,” referring to the belief that Christ only seemed to be human). Cerinthianism could help us make sense of I John 5:6, in that Cerinthus believed that the Spirit of Christ descended on the man Jesus at His baptism but left before He died on the cross (because God could not truly suffer and die as a man). John, by way of reply, is claiming that Jesus was attested as the God-man both at His baptism and at His crucifixion.
- b. It is interesting to compare I John with the Gospel in another respect. Whereas John, among the four Gospels, has the greatest focus on (a) Christ’s deity; (b) a strong “law-grace” dichotomy; (c) “realized eschatology” (eternal life or death as beginning now in the present age); and (d) the least amount of emphasis on Christ’s death as atoning, in I John more of an emphasis appears on Jesus’ humanity, on keeping the law, on future eschatology, and on Christ’s propitiatory sacrifice. One plausible explanation of all this is that as Gnostics infiltrated John’s churches in Ephesus, they emphasized certain themes of his Gospel in a one-sided direction, leading him to try to provide greater balance in his epistles in the opposite direction.¹⁸²

III. Genre and Structure

- a. First John bears few formal similarities to a letter—no typical opening or closing or any clear epistolary structure. Suggestions as to its genre have included “homily,” “diatribe,” “informal tractate,” “pastoral encyclical,” and “paper.” What is clear is that John repeatedly cycles through three key

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themes, which together form what have been called “the tests of life”: *loving one another, keeping the commandments, and believing in Jesus as fully God and fully human*.¹⁸³

Analysis

I. Prologue (1:1-4)

- a. This opening paragraph is reminiscent of the Gospel’s prologue (John 1:1-18), though shorter. The apostolic Gospel is confirmed by eyewitness testimony to the incarnation and glorification of Jesus (v. 1-2). The proclamation of the gospel is required in order to complete the fellowship and joy of the preachers and their audience (vv. 3-4).

II. The Tests of Life: Cycle One (1:5–2:27)

- a. Sin vs. obedience (1:5–2:27)
 - i. The verses in 1:5–2:6 contrast sin and obedience to stress the need to keep God’s commands.
 - 1. Three false claims combated (1:5-10)
 - A. Chapter 1:5-10 combats three false claims all related to the Gnostic doctrine of sinless perfectionism (sin was spiritualized and radically divorced from external morality): (1) One’s relationship can be separated from his or her lifestyle (v. 6); (2) it is possible to achieve a state of sinlessness as a Christian (v. 8); (3) some had in fact achieved this state quite a while ago (v. 10).
 - 2. The proper attitudes are stated (2:1-6)
 - A. By contrast, 2:1-6 describes the proper attitudes: all are still sinners but there is forgiveness through the atoning death of Christ (2:1-2; cf. 1:9), and true belief leads to a recognition of the need to obey all of Christ’s commands (vv. 3-6).
- b. Loving one another (2:7-17)
 - 1. Summing up the commands via love (vv. 7-11)

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- A. The second test of life is *love for one another* (2:7-17). Indeed, God's commands can be summed up in the one command to love (vv. 7-11). This is both an old and a new command. It was stated in the Law, but is made more possible in Christ (vv. 7-8). It is especially incumbent in the Christian fellowship (vv. 9-11).
- 2. All segments of the community are equally responsible (vv. 12:14)
 - A. Of the various suggestions for who "children," "fathers," and "young men" are in these verses, that which best fits John's usage elsewhere is to take "children" as his address to the whole community, which is then subdivided into the older and younger individuals (at least physically speaking, and possibly also spiritually).¹⁸⁴
- 3. True love rejects lust for the fallen world order (vv. 15-17)
 - A. True love involves a rejection of the lust for all things belonging to this transient world order (2:15-17). Here, John itemizes three paradigmatic temptations, not unlike those that faced Adam and Eve in the garden (Genesis 3:6) and Jesus in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11): the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, the pride of life.¹⁸⁵
- c. Correct christology (2:18-27)
 - i. False teachers as antichrists (vv.18-23)
 - 1. The third test of life involves *correct Christology* (2:18-23). The false teachers John is opposing are actually "antichrists," foreshadowing the "antichrist" of end times (v. 18). These false teachers, like some of their followers, have seceded from within the Christian community, thereby demonstrating that they truly did not belong (v. 19). Calvinists regularly see this as one of the clearest verses in Scripture to resolve the question of how to "diagnose" what happens when someone commits apostasy. These teachers, however, are claiming a unique anointing of the Spirit, which John disputes—such anointing is the prerogative of all Christians (vv. 20-21). The secessionists' fundamental doctrinal error is in denying Jesus as the Christ (vv. 22-23).

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- ii. Antidote is faithfulness to the truth originally learned (vv. 24-27)
 - 1. The antidote then is to remain faithful to the truth as originally learned (vv. 24-27). Verse 27 cannot be taken absolutely; John is, after all, teaching his readers through his letter. But the point is that they don't need any esoteric or elitist teaching to supplement what they have already learned; that is bound merely to lead them astray.
- III. The Tests of Life: Cycle Two (2:28–4:6)
 - a. Sin vs. obedience (2:28–3:10)
 - i. Again John begins by contrasting sin vs. obedience and *stressing the need to keep God's commands* (2:28–3:10).
 - 1. Main theme: "Doing righteousness" (2:29, 3:7, 10)
 - A. The main theme throughout this entire section is "doing righteousness" (2:19, 3:7, 3:10). Here is proof of regeneration, that we are children of God now (2:29), although our natures will be transformed again in a way we cannot yet understand (2:28, 3:1-3).
 - 2. Main problem: "One born of God does not sin" (3:6, 9-10)
 - A. In this context, John can declare that the one who is born of God no longer sins (3:6, 9-10). Surely he is not so quickly contradicting 1:8, 10! Of many proposed solutions, probably the best is that implied by the NIV: "No one who lives in him *keeps on sinning*" (v. 6), or "will continue to sin" (v. 9), in the sense that sin is still his or her characteristic lifestyle.¹⁸⁶ But this type of relative "sinlessness" is still diametrically opposite to that of the Gnostic, because it opposes lawlessness (vv. 4-5). Gnostics were notorious for seeing the Law (and the God) of the Old Testament as evil and therefore remaining unconcerned to keep God's commands.
 - b. Loving one another (3:11-24)
 - i. Second, John again discusses *love* (3:11-24). Here he contrasts the negative example of Cain the murderer (vv. 11-15) with the positive

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example of Jesus Christ the murdered (vv. 16-18).

1. Negative example: Cain the murderer (vv. 11-15)
2. Positive example: Jesus Christ the murdered (vv. 16-18)
 - A. The ultimate example of love is Christ's sacrificial death (v. 16); such sacrifice on our part can surely extend at least to our material possessions (vv. 17-18). Verses 19-24 describe the assurance of our salvation which love in our lives can give. These are precious verses for those who doubt earlier experiences—if their professions of faith have resulted in a genuinely transformed life. Then our consciences can be greatly encouraged (vv. 19-22). Verses 23-24 show how closely related the three tests of life are. In a sense, each can be defined in terms of the other two.
- c. Correct Christology (4:1-6)
 - i. Distinguishing true vs. false prophecy (vv. 1-3)
 1. Third, John returns to *correct christology* (4:1-6). To distinguish true from false prophecy, we must “test the spirits.” Then, as now, one's understanding of Jesus is the key (vv. 1-3).
 - ii. Superiority of Spirit of truth to spirit of falsehood (vv. 4-6)
 1. But the Spirit of truth is always superior to the Spirit of falsehood, so we never have to fear that the powers of evil can overcome God's Spirit indwelling within us (vv. 4-6).

IV. The Tests of Life: Cycle Three (4:7–5:21)

- a. Loving one another (4:7-21)
 - i. This time John begins with the second test—of *love* (4:7-21). Most of the themes in these verses repeat what he has already brought up, doubtless for emphasis.
 1. Key clarification: God/love not interchangeable (v.8)
 - A. God Himself is called love (v. 8), a statement which is not all Scripture has to say about God, nor one which can be reversed (love is not God).
 2. Key new theme: Perfect love casts out all fear (v. 18)

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- A. Still, love is the heart of God's essence, and reflects the attribute which should dominate Christians' lives to the point that all terror vanishes (v. 18). The worst that can happen to us in this life is far more than compensated by eternal bliss with Christ.
- b. Correct christology (5:1-15)
 - i. The interrelationship of the three tests (vv. 1-5)
 - 1. Chapter 5:1-15 returns to the theme of *correct Christology*. Verses 1-5 give another good summary of the interrelationship of the three tests.
 - ii. The witnesses: Baptism and crucifixion of Christ (vv. 6-8)
 - 1. Verses 6-8 refute Cerinthianism, as noted in the "Introduction." A famous textual variant in these verses not found in any Greek manuscript until the Middle Ages adds a Trinitarian witness, but it is almost certainly not the original text despite its inclusion in the King James Version.
 - iii. The credible and compelling testimony (vv. 9-12)
 - 1. Verses 9-12 note that the testimony on behalf of Christ is credible and compelling.
 - iv. Present belief as assurance of salvation (vv. 13-15)
 - 1. Verse 13 stresses that, like love, present belief, too, can be an important assurance of salvation for someone who may doubt whether he or she has done everything properly in the past. This assurance extends to God's promise to answer our prayers (vv. 14-15). But, as in James, the important proviso of "according to his will" must be included.
- c. Sin vs. obedience (5:16-21)
 - i. The sin that leads to death (vv. 16-17)
 - 1. Finally, John returns to the contrast between *sin and obedience* (5:16-21). There is a sin which leads to death (vv. 16-17). If "brother" is limited to true Christians, then this must either imply loss of salvation or refer to physical death (as with Ananias and Sapphira).

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- ii. Not a sin that threatens true believers (vv. 18-20)
 - 1. But life and death in John elsewhere consistently mean eternal life or death, so it is probably best to recognize that “brother” for him simply means fellow member of the community (church). Yet some of these brothers can prove false (e.g., 3:10). This then is probably not a sin which threatens true Christians (vv. 18-20).
- d. Closing exhortation and summary (v. 21)
 - i. Indeed John ends with the promise that the devil can never ultimately overwhelm the believer. But that does not mean he cannot have a powerful effect on us if we let him. So John closes abruptly but appropriately with the command to avoid idolatry (v. 21).

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