1 John: Life, Light and Love

1. Introduction

a. Scams such as we experience today have been going on for centuries, even in the days when the New Testament was being written. In those days they were targeting something different – the Christian faith. This was far more serious than losing money to a con artist – it was about potentially losing your soul because you bought into a false religion.

i Paul warned the church in Corinth to be on their guard not to be taken in by them:

2 Corinthians 11:13-15 *For such men are false apostles, deceitful workmen, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ. [14] And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light. [15] So it is no surprise if his servants, also, disguise themselves as servants of righteousness. Their end will correspond to their deeds.*

ii Jesus had some strong words to say about people who led others astray in the guise of angels of light but were really false teachers:

Matthew 7:21-23 *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. [22] On that day many will say to me, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?' [23] And then will I declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.'*

b. Following on from understanding Jesus as a Bridegroom, a King and a Judge, there are practical ways that will help us to know that the Jesus we are committed to is real and genuine. We need to know that our faith is objectively true, and that the testimony of Jesus that we have received is genuine, and not the work of spiritual con artists.

c. One of the most helpful and practical books that gives us sound doctrine on which to base that knowledge is the first letter of John – 1 John. It is packed full of wisdom and John's first-hand knowledge that will give us some checks and balances to make sure we are following the real Jesus and not a counterfeit.

2. Background to the book

a. Written by the apostle John, though his name doesn't appear in the text. The content of the book, the subjects covered and the style of writing are so similar to the gospel of John that it could only have been written by the same person. H he writes with very clear and strong apostolic authority. he writes with very clear and strong apostolic authority.

b. John led a long and eventful life, being the only one of the original 12 disciples that was not martyred for his faith.

c. John lived into his nineties, and later in his life he was based in the church at Ephesus. While in Ephesus that he wrote his gospel, probably around 85-90AD. The book of Revelation was written around 95AD, and most scholars and commentators place 1, 2 and 3 John in between the two, in the early 90s.

d. Ephesus in the first century AD was known as one of the most prolific and successful churches in the region, and it had great influence over many of the other churches of Asia Minor.

Whenever there is a great move of God, the enemy will always come in and try to bring corruption and destruction.

i Paul tells us that false teachers had arisen among the churches in Asia Minor, especially at Ephesus. John describes these men in quite strong terms. He says these were not true followers of Jesus with different opinions on some minor matters, he calls them false prophets, antichrists, liars and deceivers. He says time after time that these men are not of God, but from the devil or from the world and they don't know God.

e. John says that their goal was to deceive Christians in many important areas of both doctrine and practice.

1 John 2:26 *I write these things to you about those who are trying to deceive you.*

i Many of them had been in the church at one time, but had left either to form their own churches or to concentrate on some kind of ministry to spread their teaching.

1 John 2:19 *They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us…*

f. These people when they left had taken a number of church members with them, however, they were still actively recruiting from among those who hadn't left.

i In so doing they sowed the seeds of doubt among the people. Those who remained would begin to question whether this group who had left could be right.

ii We see many of these same things happening in the church today, those who have departed from the truth as defined by the scriptures, some teaching that the grace of God absolves you from personal responsibility for your own sin, and many others that focus on a form of religion, but deny the power of God.

g. We must use solid biblical discernment about what we take on board from people running their own personal ministries. We need to make sure that the outworking of our faith has its roots in what the Bible says, and that it is not coloured by someone else's opinion or interpretation.

i Without good solid bible teaching, even the best of churches will always gravitate towards the weird and the wonderful and many solid and clear biblical doctrines become blurry grey areas open to personal interpretation.

h. There is a school of thought that John in this letter is making a distinction between two different categories of Christians: those who walk in the light and those who don't; those who confess their sins and those who don't; those who are worldly and those who are not, and so on. That is not the comparison John is making. The main theme of this letter, and the comparison that John is making is the sustained contrast between those who are true followers of Christ and those who are not.

i. John wrote this letter to confront these 1st century scammers who were leading others astray. We must take note, because it highlights some areas where greater clarity in our thinking and understanding will help us not be led astray.

i John doesn't paint with subtle tones. His pastoral heart and love for people comes through frequently, but he is forthright when it comes to those who have departed from the truth.

j. John has a linguistic style where he describes two options. He says that either you love the world or you love the Father, but you can't do both (2:15). Either you have the Father and the Son or you don't (2:22-23). Either you are born of God and do not practice sin or you are not born of God and do practice sin (3:6-9). Either you are a child of God and love your brother or you're a child of the devil and hate your brother (3:10-12). These are your options: walk in the truth or walk knowingly into error. John doesn't give the option of modifying foundational truth to fit the current social, moral and political trends.

3. Three main errors

a. There are three main errors that John addresses in this letter. He doesn't name those teaching this false doctrine, but he makes some direct references to what they were teaching, counteracting each point with biblical truth.

i In the text John is very clear about the positive emphasis that he states, counteracting their negatives. Here's what we can figure out: The error was three-fold, there was a doctrinal element, an ethical or moral element, and a relational element.

b. The **doctrinal** error concerned the person of Jesus. They denied that Jesus was the Christ, and that he was the Son of God who had come in the flesh. John counteracts these errors in two statements:

1 John 2:22 *Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.*

1 John 4:2 *By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God…*

i So in other word they denied that Jesus was God in human flesh. The fact is that most theological errors revolve around the person of Jesus or the work of Jesus, because these subjects are so central to the Christian faith. Paul said that preaching Jesus was a stumbling block to both Jews and Gentiles.

c. The **ethical** or **moral** error goes hand in hand with the theological error. These people denied that sin exists in our nature or in our practice, and that sin doesn't matter because it doesn't interfere with our fellowship with God. There is a theological name for this error, which is Antinomianism – which means against the law. John refutes this right at the beginning.

1 John 1:6-10 *If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. [7] But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. [8] If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. [9] If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. [10] If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.*

d. The third error, the **relational** part, is one that John addresses numerous times throughout the letter. These people claimed to be loving, but in practice they didn't demonstrate genuine, biblical love for others. Their claim to a special, deeper knowledge may have caused them to

come across with arrogance. They were hostile and intolerant of those who didn't agree with them.

e. Jesus tells us that in the last days there will be many false teachers and many of these early heresies will surface again.

f. The main problem that John and the church in Ephesus was facing was a heresy known as Gnosticism. This was a philosophical blend of pagan, Jewish, and semi-Christian systems of thought. Its two main strands were dualism and illumination.

   i Dualism meant that all matter is evil and spirit is good. Since matter is evil, a good God could not have created the material universe. Since matter is evil, they could not conceive of how God could take on a human body subject to pain, suffering, and death. Thus they denied the incarnation.

g. Dualism necessitated the invention of many fanciful means to explain away the truth of scripture. As well as denying the deity of Jesus, they had to find creative ways to explain the crucifixion of Jesus as a man, but not as God.

   i John responds again with a straight-to-the-point rebuttal of this idea:

1 John 5:6 *This is he who came by water and blood---Jesus Christ; not by the water only but by the water and the blood. And the Spirit is the one who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.*

   ii John is stating emphatically that Jesus as the Christ came not only through His baptism (water), but also through His death (blood). You cannot separate the humanity of Jesus from His deity.

h. The second strand of Gnosticism is Illumination. Gnostics claimed that the only way to salvation was through secret enlightenment. Only the initiated who knew these secrets were in the light. This exclusive mentality led some to despise the "unenlightened." John counters that lovelessness by peppering this letter with many encouragements to love one another, showing that genuine love is the mark of all who truly believe.

4. A dual-purpose letter

a. The first reason that John wrote the letter is to confront and refute the errors that were being promoted in the church at that time, which serves as a warning to us to be on the lookout for any teaching or doctrine of a similar nature that we encounter today.

b. The second purpose behind why John wrote this letter is pastoral. John wanted to cultivate in the hearts of the people an assurance of who Jesus is, an assurance of salvation expressed through genuine fellowship with God and with one another. He frequently refers to his readers as his "little children" addressing them with his fatherly heart.

   i He wants them to know with full assurance who Jesus is and why he came. He describes him as the eternal son of God, sent by the Father to be the saviour of the world (1 John 4:14).

c. John appeals to three witnesses that help ground us in truth:

i The **historical events** – He was sent by the Father (1 John 4:9, 10, 14); He came (1 John 5:20) and He was manifested in the flesh (1 John 1:2, 3:5, 8, 4:2).

ii The **apostolic testimony** – The apostles had first-hand, eyewitness account of this reality.

iii The **Holy Spirit** – He gives inner witness of the truth about Jesus to every believer, confirming the external witness (1 John 2:20, 27, 3:24, 4:13, 5:7-8).

d. Throughout the letter he is seeking to cultivate an assurance about eternal life. He wants us to be absolutely sure that we have eternal life. This includes the revelation of knowing Jesus (2:3, 5:20), and the knowledge that we are in Him (2:5-6, 4:13, 5:20). It means we know we are of the truth (3:19) and are of God (5:19) and we have passed from death into life (3:14). He sums all this up in one verse:

1 John 5:13 *I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God that you may know that you have eternal life.*

i John wants his readers to be filled with assurance and with confidence that their faith in Jesus is genuine. He wants your faith to be rock-solid, built on a foundation that is unshakable. Here's a summary what John wants us to know in one sentence, which is what this book is all about:

We can be assured of the authenticity of our faith if we enjoy fellowship with God based on the truth about Jesus Christ, resulting in a lifestyle of obedience and love.

5. Full assurance of faith

a. In the first three verses of this letter, John lays out the foundation on which he is going to build, based on his own foundation of faith.

1 John1:1-3 *That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – [2] the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us – [3] that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.*

b. In these verses John makes five main assertions:

i John has first-hand experience of the person of Jesus Christ

ii Jesus, who is the Word of life, has eternally existed with the Father

iii Jesus, the Word of life, was manifested in the flesh

iv Through Jesus' incarnation John has obtained fellowship with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ

v Therefore, John makes the proclamation of Jesus the basis of his fellowship with other believers

c. This is the introduction to the whole letter, starting with John's credentials and how he understands this knowledge leads to full assurance of faith. He has heard, seen, looked upon

and touched the word of life, speaking of Jesus. He had heard the very words of Jesus – Jesus' own words bear witness to who he is.

i John watched with his own eyes, and saw the miracles – turning water into wine, feeding the 5,000, walking on water, healing multitudes, raising the dead, as well as the many things that he did that are not recorded in the gospels. John saw the reality of who Jesus was as the Son of God.

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

d. He wants us to catch a glimpse of the glory of this man that he once walked with in the flesh. He goes on to speak of the eternal nature of Jesus and the eternal life that he brings. Jesus has eternally existed with the Father and everything else flows from this – he and he alone is our source of eternal life.

e. John reminds us that Jesus was manifested in the flesh. He was a real man with real flesh and blood. What John is addressing here is that there are those who only see Jesus in terms of his spiritual existence and not as someone who is still very much flesh and blood. Jesus is a man and will always be a man, and it is as a physical man that he will return at the end of the age.

i When God becomes a man, man ceases to be the measure of all things because the sinfulness of fallen man is exposed by the sinlessness of the perfect man. This one man now becomes the measure of all things. We can no longer depend on our own wisdom to find the way to eternal life; this one man says "I am the way, the truth and the life."

ii Only the Spirit of God can break our rebellion and cause us to submit gladly to Jesus as our absolute sovereign. Hence the confession that God has come in the flesh is John's doctrinal test of whether or not we are of God.

f. Jesus coming in the flesh is the bridge that opens up fellowship with the Father. The Greek word is "koinonia", and it's the personal experience of sharing something significant in common with others, where you see eye to eye with what really matters. It's having similar values and responding with the same kind of affections on matters that really count.

g. The last point is a bit controversial. Many churches today preserve fellowship among believers on the basis of shared experience rather than on the basis of shared theology. However, this is not the biblical way, and often results in a church that is unbalanced and lacking purpose.

i John says it is the proclamation of Jesus that is the source of fellowship among believers. The proclamation of Jesus is based on knowing who Jesus is and what he is doing.

ii In other words, the basis of our fellowship may include shared experience, but it has to be based on shared theology. This comes from believing the Word of God to be final in all matters of doctrine and theology. Our understanding and interpretation of the scriptures must be based on solid biblical practice founded on the apostles' teaching.

h. John's message to us today is that true Christianity is essentially knowing Jesus revealed, experienced and proclaimed – revealed in the scriptures, experienced in new life and fellowship, and proclaimed with joy. It's up to us to make sure that we've got the real deal!