

NEW TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 44

1 John

I was teaching a class at a law school in Texas on jury selection (the legal term is *voir dire* from the French for “speak the truth”). Jury selection varies state by state, but in Texas, the lawyers take turns standing before a gathered panel of potential jurors and spend an allotted time asking questions geared toward determining whether each person would be a good, fair, and impartial juror.

Part of the class was a demonstration of the process. I conducted a *voir dire* so the class could see how it unfolded in a practical fashion. I had handed out a make believe case as a fact pattern so the students would be able to see how to handle certain facts that might give rise to a bias or sympathy in certain jurors. For the potential jurors, I used the 60 law students taking the class. Most of the students were “young” for a jury panel, aging in the low to mid-twenties.

While the goal was teaching the class the ins and outs of jury selection, I learned something myself in the process. Normally I don’t have a panel of potential jurors where they are all so young. Selecting from a group all in that young age-range made me realize something that had been ongoing in my mind subconsciously in the decades I had been selecting jurors: it is easier to select jurors who are older!

Why? One of the things you do in selecting a jury is try to determine what someone will do with the particular fact pattern that is the case on trial. If I want to know where someone is going to go with a situation, I need to see where life has taken them so far. I need history, which is something that by definition, young people don’t have in abundance.

Think of it this way, if I want to know how you are going to go down the road of life, I need to know how you have gone down that road up to that point. Very few people do u-turns on the road of life. Whatever has shaped you and helped you determine your priorities, your reactions, your sympathies, etc., will continue to do so into the future.

I remember this lesson as I write on First John because the letter of First John was dealing with the future road. First John was written at a time where the author had seen a road where certain people within the church had been. He was able to see where that road had led to that point in history, and even more importantly, he saw where that road would lead the church in the future. It was the wrong road, and it led to destruction. First John was written to expose that, and to get the readers off that road. They must not follow those leaders who were rushing to destruction.

BACKGROUND

It is apparent from studying 1 John, and the related letters of 2 and 3 John, that the church was confronting some serious issues of who Christ was, how we can be confident in our hope, the role of the Spirit in the church and believer, the significance of a Christian community in fellowship together, how sin matters, and how God atoned for sin. These issues threatened the fabric of the church, but also threatened the truth on which the church was built. Many of the questions seem seemed dressed up in different clothes today, but are still questions that persist:

- Was Jesus Christ *really* the Son of God come in the flesh?
- Was his death *really* necessary to forgive sins, or was it merely a tragic injustice imparted a spiritualized meaning by well-intentioned followers?
- If the answers to the above two questions are not unequivocal yeses, then what does it say about our lives of faith? Or we deluded? Are we naïve fools giving our lives to a myth or some other untruth? Do we not really have an eternal life? Is such an idea a silly make believe story?

Authorship

The letter we know as First John is a bit unlike the other letters in the New Testament, save Hebrews. It is an anonymous letter. Nowhere does the author set out his name. Similarly, the author does not tell us any identifying specifics about the recipients.

So, why is this letter called First John? The reasons for John's authorship are fairly well understood. First, the author clearly claims to have been an eyewitness of Jesus. He writes as one who has "seen," "heard," and "touched" Jesus (1 Jn. 1:1). The writing itself has an unmistakable tone of apostolic authority. John was loath to identify himself even in his gospel. We should not be surprised to find the same approach here.

John's authorship is also attested to heavily in church history. History records Polycarp, who died in 156, as one of the Apostle John's disciples. In his letter to the Philippian church, written in the first half of the second century, Polycarp closely mirrored 1 John 4:2-3.

Polycarp:

Everyone who does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is an antichrist (Phil. 7:1)

1 John:

Every spirit that does not confess that Jesus has come in the flesh is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist (1 Jn. 4:2-3)

A number of early writings attest to the early authorship of the epistle and at least gives credence to the early church tradition of John's authorship. In the first listing we have of New Testament books (called the "Muratorian Canon" dating around 170), we have 1 John included and quoted. There is a great deal of other church tradition that ascribes the book to John as well.¹

If we compare this letter to the gospel of John, we find similar vocabulary, similar style, and several clear references to the gospel. If the letter was not written by the same author as the gospel, the letter's author was clearly steeped in intimate knowledge of the gospel.²

John wrote the epistle somewhere around the end of the first century. The epistle is 25 to 30 years after the writings of Peter and Paul. Much happened to the church in those intervening years. All of the apostles of Jesus were dead, save the apostle John. The Christian community had severed most ties with Judaism after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. The Jerusalem Jewish community, including the Jewish Christians, dispersed into the world after that time. History tells us that John went to Ephesus where he was the church authority for the churches in Asia Minor until his death. According to the Muratorian canon³, John wrote this letter at the bequest of his congregations to set out certain truths and counsel.

Recipients

The letter seems to be what scholars call a "circular letter." That is *not* a reference to the logic of the letter, but rather means that the letter was not sent to one church only. It was meant to *circulate* among a region of churches. The problems that the author addresses were not limited to one church. They were the fruit of some

¹ See the excellent details given by Georg Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John* (Hermeneia - Fortress Press, 1996), xxix.

² For example, see the similarities in the way the gospel and letter start, "In the beginning was the Word" (Jn. 1:1), and "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard... seen... touched... the Word of Life." Similarly consider John 1:14, "The Word was made manifest..." with 1 John 1:2, "the word of life was made manifest..." Both books continually draw on the metaphor of Jesus as "light" (Jn. 1:6-9; 1 Jn. 1:5-7). John refers to the Holy Spirit as the *paraclete* while 1 John uses the term for Jesus (Jn. 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7; 1 Jn. 2:1). Both write of a "new commandment" (Jn. 13:34; 1 Jn. 2:7), and more. See the list at footnote 3 Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John-Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Eerdmans, 2000), p. 5.

³ The Muratorian canon is a reference to a list of books considered to be part of a greater "Bible." This is the oldest list we have of what books were considered by the church to comprise "Scripture." The fragment we have dates from the 600's, but it is a Latin translation/copy of an earlier list in Greek that most scholars date around 170AD. The dating because is based in large part on the reference internally to the recent Bishop of Rome, Pius I, who governed the church from 142-157. The fragment not only references John and 1 John as canonical, but actually quote from 1 John in a way that clearly indicates the position that both "johns" were written by the apostle John.

itinerant false teachers who were going from church to church spreading their heretical ideas.

The letter attacks certain heresies that seem to have split the church. Some who held onto these false teachings had left the church but were still reaching in to persuade others to follow in their heresies. We can read some early extra-biblical writers to get ideas of what may have been happening. A key writer in this regard was the second century defender of the faith, Irenaeus (120-202AD), Bishop of Lyon. Irenaeus recounted history given by John's student Polycarp about an encounter between John and a man named Cerinthus.

There are also those who heard from him [Polycarp] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, "Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within" (*Against Heresies* 3.3.4).

Why was Cerinthus so shunned? Cerinthus taught a particular heresy. This heresy was an early type of Gnosticism (taken from the Greek word for "knowledge").⁴ Cerinthus taught that Jesus was a man born of Mary and Joseph (as opposed to the virgin birth). There was nothing particularly divine about Jesus until his baptism. At that point, the Spirit of God descended on Jesus with the outward form of a dove. Jesus then stayed divine right up to the point of the crucifixion. On Calvary, the Spirit left Jesus leaving the human to die while watching the scene play out.

Cerinthus taught that matter and flesh were evil, while spiritual unseen matter was good. So, true God was never flesh and blood for that would make God evil. Christ was always spirit, no more. This heresy had dramatic implications even beyond the denial of the deity of Jesus. It gave a basis for a number of its adherents to believe that morality was irrelevant to the Christian ("antinomianism").

John's writings offer a strong refutation to this belief. John makes it clear Jesus Christ came in the flesh, was touchable, and died in the flesh. This made John a ready tool for Irenaeus in his assault on the full-blown gnostic heresies in the next generation.

An even earlier source gives us perhaps more direct clues to the heretics John wrote to expose. Ignatius was the bishop (pastor) of the church at Antioch, the ancient Christian community where the church members were first called Christians (Acts 11:26). Within a decade of John's letter, Ignatius was sentenced to die because he wouldn't recant his faith that Jesus was the crucified and resurrected God. Ignatius

⁴ For more on this, see the Church History Literacy lesson on Irenaeus at www.Biblical-literacy.com.

died in Rome in 107, and on his way to his death, composed a number of letters to churches he passed travelling from Antioch to Rome.

Ignatius wanted his readers to know without any doubt that Jesus was really human and really God. Jesus really suffered and died on a cross. Jesus was physically resurrected. Like so many others in the second generation of faith, Ignatius was so convinced, that he was gladly giving his life over his convictions. In his letter to the church at Smyrna, Ignatius emphasized as much, adding that those who think Jesus was only an apparition or something less than real, that those are the folks who are not living in reality.

Consider these powerful excerpts from a man facing his death for holding to the claim, and writing just 15 years give or take after 1 John:

For I have observed that you are established in immovable faith . . . being fully persuaded as touching our Lord, that he is in truth of the family of David according to the flesh, God's son by the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin, baptized by John that "all righteousness might be fulfilled by Him", truly nailed to a tree in the flesh for our sakes under Pontius Pilate and Herod the tetrarch.

For he suffered all these things for us that we might attain salvation, and he truly suffered, even as he truly raised himself, not, as some unbelievers say, that his Passion was merely in semblance, — but it is they who are merely in semblance, and even according to their opinions it shall be to them, and they shall be without bodies and phantasmal.

For I know and believe that he was in the flesh even after the resurrection (*Smyrn.* 1:1–2; 2:1; 3:1).

In another of these letters to the church at Trallia, Ignatius showed he knew full well that this critical belief of his was the reason he would die.

But if, as some affirm who are without God, — that is, are unbelievers, — his suffering was only a semblance (but it is they who are merely a semblance), why am I a prisoner, and why also do I even long to fight with the beasts? In that case I am dying in vain. Then indeed am I lying concerning the Lord (*Trall.* 10:1).

TEXT

Like his gospel, John starts his letter referencing the beginning. In the gospel, John echoed the words of Genesis one with "In the beginning was the word...." In this

letter, John first writes, “What was from the beginning....” John wants there to be no question where he stands on the reality of Jesus; so, he writes that “What was from the beginning” was something he had “heard” with his ears, something he had “seen” with his eyes,” and something he had “handled” with his hands. This physical being was the “Word of Life,” a life manifested or made evident in the man Jesus whom John had actually seen and heard. This was no apparition, dream, or vision. This was the Eternal Life that was with the Father but came to earth as a man.

Because of Jesus, this real person, John had fellowship with God. Through his witness, John also had fellowship with the Christians reading the letter, just as those Christians had fellowship with God and Jesus.

In this regard, a moment on the word “fellowship” is useful. It is the Greek word *koinonia* which means a “commonness,” a “sharing.” In Greek of John’s time it was a common word for a group or congregation gathered for a common purpose, whether political, social, or otherwise. We can fairly call “church” as John uses it, but we need to remember that it is a knitting together of people around something. Much like the hub of a wheel is the meeting place for the spokes. This commonness has an earthly or horizontal element, as we, the church, share together. It also has a vertical element. Because the same tie that binds us as family is the tie that binds us to God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit (1:1-4).

About God, John has several things to say. God is “light.” Not just a bright light or indirect light, but God is 100% pure light. In him is “no darkness.” If we understand light as purity, then God is 100% pure. If we understand light as the source of life, then God is the only source of life. If we know light to be eye opening to reality and truth, then God is 100% real truth. God is not partially what we need. He is not some of the guidance for life. He is not “sort of” our source and answer. He and he alone is the total fulfillment of our every need.

Now, because God is so pure and 100% light, we are walking with him in fellowship only when we walk in light. We cannot be doing the deeds of darkness and claim that we are fellowshiping with God. God would and could have no part of darkness. Our fellowship with God, our commonness and sharing with God, is found when we walk in the light. When we walk in truth and God’s own character, we have fellowship with him. Our sins are forgiven and we dwell within the very presence of God.

John is careful to point out that he is not advocating some earthly perfection on our part. In fact, he adds that if we say we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and telling a lie! In other words, we sin merely in saying we do not sin!

John does not mean that our fellowship is based on being perfect. When he speaks of walking in the light, he means living our lives oriented to God, focused on his goodness and holiness, and trying by the strength of his Spirit to live accordingly.

We do not achieve God's perfection, but we strive to do right and live as he would have us live. This includes confessing our sins, and we walk with him then because he forgives our sins (1:5-10).

With compassion, John begins chapter two addressing his readers as "My little children." John relates that his purpose in writing to them was to help them in holiness. John wants his readers not to sin. Even while stating such, John then adds that they must know that when they do sin, they have Jesus Christ as an advocate before the Father. And, what an advocate we have in Jesus. Jesus himself is the "propitiation" for our sin. "Propitiation" references that Jesus himself paid the penalty for our sin. John adds that Jesus did so, not just for us, but for the whole world.

This news is wonderful news for those who know Jesus. This is the basis of our fellowship with God. This is what we live for and long for. This is the answer to life's most ultimate human questions: Who are we? What are we here for? Why do we feel there is more to life? We are people separated from God by sin. We are made to be in fellowship with him, and by the death of Jesus, we have a basis for knowing God.

When John speaks of knowing God, he is using a word that is important in multiple aspects. First, the word itself denotes an intimate relationship, not a mere intellectual awareness or acquaintance. We are intimately tied to God. Second, the word was a key gnostic term that was used in reference to "hidden knowledge" among the Gnostics that lead to a supposedly higher level of spirituality. Yet for John, knowing God is basic and simple. It is an intimate relationship founded on the saving work of Jesus Christ. One way we know when we are in this relationship is by examining our lives. When we try to honor and keep God's instructions, it is a sure fire indication we are people of faith and that God is at work in our lives. By the same token, if we claim to be people of faith, but live with a reckless disregard for God and his instructions, then we are lying to others and ourselves. People with no care for what God has said are not people who are close to God (2:1-6).

John writes that his message here is both new and not new! It is not new in the sense that it is the message that came with their first conversion. Truth be told, it the message of the ages handed down from the beginning of time. However, it is also a new message. New in the sense of fresh, new in the sense that we are forgiven moment by moment. We are in fellowship with God day by day. New in the sense that our darkness recedes more and more as we learn and walk more in his light.

John notes another way to tell that our faith is genuine. As we love those around us, we see that we are sharing in God's character. If we hate our brother, but claim to be God's children walking in his light, we are wrong. God does not hate our brother. How could we be people of hate and be in fellowship or common sharing of God? Hate of others is darkness, not light (2:7-12).

John then writes a message broken down into age groups. He writes to “little children,” to “fathers,” to “young men,” and to “children.” His reference to “little children” is likely his reference to all readers. It is a reference he uses multiple times throughout his letter. So in 2:12, he notes that he is writing to “you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for His name’s sake.” But, John then breaks down the readers into “fathers,” “young men,” and “children.” We may fairly assume that John is writing with a bit of focus on the older and the younger audience.

To the “fathers,” John writes to them as men who know God intimately, to men who understand God as the God of eternity. To the “young men,” John addresses their strength. John sees them as ones who have overcome the evil one, with the word of God abiding in them. John encourages these to not love the world nor things in the world. John emphasizes that these worldly things, including lust of the flesh and eyes as well as the boastful pride of life, is not from God. It is temporary as opposed to eternal.

To the “children,” John writes about the antichrist. He references that while the “antichrist is coming,” many antichrists have already arisen. John warns the readers that there are many who claim to be of God and his kingdom, but who are in fact falsehoods. Anyone who denies God the Father and God the Son as to their person or work is not of the church, regardless of whatever else they may say!

John wants his readers to abide in Christ and God the Father. He wants them to stay tucked under the wing of eternal God. He wants them living lives that show God, his love, and his truth to the world (2:12-29).

John was still amazed at the love God had for us. Writing in his 80’s, John’s astonishment over God is evident from each phrase he composes. He writes, “See how great a love the Father has bestowed upon us, that we should be called children of God!” And, that is what we are. We are children of the one God who created all things. We are his very own children. Now, the world will not see this or understand it. For the world does not have the relationship with God we do. How can non-children understand the life of a child? By the same token, to the extent we draw our meaning and understanding from the world, we will not understand just how amazing and incredible life is for us.

Because we still live in this life span, because we live in the “now” and the “not yet,” we are now God’s children, set apart and changed from the world. However, we do not yet know what we shall be when He appears and we are made like him as we see him face to face.

In the meantime, we live focused on doing right by our God and father. We try to avoid sin, knowing he died to remove the sin from us. Sin is a serious matter to us. It not only killed our Lord in his earthly walk, but we also know it to be the fruit of

the Devil. Jesus is about destroying Satan's work. Far be it from us to indulge in Satan's work! (3:1-12)

So as we are about doing the work of God rather than the work of Satan, to some degree, we set ourselves against the fallen world and its people as well. The world will not be fond of us. We should not be shocked that we are hated by some of the world. We stand for something that flies in the face of the world's values.

If the world lives for "self" and we do not, then we will certainly be out of step with the world. We are to live for others, tending to the needs we see as we have ability. This is yet another way we know God is working in us. God gave his life for us, and when we see that we love others, not just with our words but with our deeds, then we can know it is the same God at work in us.

John is sensitive to our need to know God is at work within us. John writes about those times where we might question how genuine our own faith is. John says there are times where our head needs to trump what our heart might be feeling. Our faith is not one of feeling but one of knowing. So when our hearts might condemn us, we can confidently answer our hearts with the conscious awareness that we belong to him. We have put our trust in him, and he is faithful to answer that trust. He abides in us and will work in our lives (3:13-24).

John writes in chapter four about others who might be teaching the Christians. John teaches them not to believe everyone who teaches, but to test "the spirits" to see whether they are from God. Those who confess that Jesus was real, that Jesus was God come in the flesh, are those confessing the truth. But, the gnostic teachers who denied the reality of Jesus were against truth and God. These were antichrists and deceivers (4:1-6).

Where does this leave the believer? John recalls the theme he has trumpeted since the beginning of his letter. He urges the readers to love each other deeply and in very real ways. Our motivation for loving is simple. It is not because others deserve our love, nor is it because others will reward our love. We love because of God. God first loved us, and that love has transformed us. We have taken on his nature. Just as he first loved us, so we love others. And as we love others in this way, we see God's love growing and maturing in us.

So, we love because he first loved us. As we love, we grow in faith. We have no fear of man or Satan. Fear takes a backseat to the confidence we have in God and Jesus. His mature love drives out fear (4:7-21).

John begins his final chapter with words that remind us of the Nicodemus story John related in the third chapter of his gospel. Jesus told Nicodemus that unless a man be born again, he would not see the kingdom. Here in 1 John 5, we read John saying that whoever believes that Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, is born of God.

But, our life does not end with this rebirth. We are able to see how we focus on the important things of living to please our heavenly Father, and we take joy in doing right by him. We share in Jesus and his overcoming of the world by our lives. We have God in all three persons confirming our reborn lives. Not only do the three persons in the Godhead confirm our reality in him, but the three elements do also: The Spirit that indwells us, the water of baptism, and the blood of Christ (which is our communion service) (5:1-12).

John wrote these things to believers so they would more fully understand with confidence their secure eternity with God. John wanted them to know as they were in fellowship with God that they had the ear of God. God would hear and honor them, as they were honoring their Father. Jesus was a reality, not a fiction. Jesus was God made flesh, not an apparition. Faith was a real choice in life, not a mystical leap. John wrote of eternal truth (5:13-21).

POINTS FOR HOME

In selecting our points for home, I have chosen three of John's "we know" statements:

1. *"We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one"* (1 Jn. 5:19).

Let's not have an identity crisis. We are not just fish plus time. We are unique and special. We are intentioned beings from the mind and hands of God. He has sought us and redeemed us and made of us something different than anything in the cosmos. There is a uniqueness not only to people, but to those who know God. In faith, we are transformed.

2. *"And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life"* (1 Jn. 5:20).

Part of our transformation lies in seeing truth for truth. We see the world truly in its goodness as well as its ugliness. We expect predictability and know the laws of nature are consistent and reliable, as they reflect our consistent and reliable God who made nature. But we also know that nature is not the whole picture. We know there is another dimension, another reality, beyond that of the chemicals, atoms, and other structures that compose this world. That means our relationships and conscious thoughts aren't simply chemical reactions. There is reality we can live in that infuses dignity and meaning in us and our lives. We see that in the true and eternal God's revelation to us.

3. *“We know that everyone who has been born of God does not keep on sinning, but he who was born of God protects him, and the evil one does not touch him” (1 Jn. 5:18).*

This knowledge and rebirth gives us not only purpose and direction, but changes how we live in a moral way. We do not live without regard to sin, but with great effort to shun sin. We know what sin is. We know it’s destructive. We know it leads to death. We know it alienates us from God. We know there is an evil one who seeks to ensnare us in sin, and we seek God’s protection. This is the final phrase of the prayer we’ve been taught to pray, “lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one!”

Amen!