

## *1st John – Article 1*

Today many people claim to be Christians. In fact, a 1986 Gallup Survey revealed that ninety-four percent of adult Americans believe in God, and that seventy-six percent believe that Jesus is either God or the Son of God. The problem, of course, is that actions speak louder than words. Only forty percent reported that they had attended church in the last week, and a mere ten percent claimed to read the Bible on a daily basis.

How are we to respond to this kind of situation? How can we tell the difference between genuine Christians and those who merely profess to know Christ? John's letters were written for that very purpose. John writes to expose the false claims of those whose conduct contradicts their claims. He also provides strong assurance to those whose lifestyle is consistent with their Christian faith.

1st John was written around A.D. 85-95 by the apostle John. Evidently the letter was circulated among a number of churches in Asia who were threatened by false teachers. These false teachers embraced an early form of heresy known as Gnosticism. They taught that matter was entirely evil and spirit was entirely good. This teaching resulted in two fundamental errors:

**A "new" theology.** This centered in a denial of the incarnation. Since God could not be contaminated by a human body, these false teachers did not believe God became man in Jesus Christ. Some taught that he merely seemed to have a body. Others claimed that the divine Christ descended on Jesus at his baptism but departed before the crucifixion. This latter view seems to be in the background of much of 1 John.

**A "new" morality.** These false teachers also claimed "to have reached such an advanced stage in spiritual experience that they were 'beyond good and evil.' They maintained that they had no sin, not in the sense that they had attained moral perfection but in the sense that what might be sin for people at a less mature stage of inner development was no longer sin for the completely 'spiritual' man. For him ethical distinctions had ceased to be relevant" (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 26).

What intensified this problem was that these false teachers had once been an active part of the fellowship which John's readers were continuing to enjoy (see 2:19). But because their "new" teaching was so contrary to the apostolic truths of the gospel, they had to part company with the faithful. As you can well imagine, those who remained in the true fellowship were unsettled and shaken by the defection of these new teachers and needed to be reassured. But in the process, the others also needed to be exposed for what they truly were—unbelieving heretics.

In order to accomplish both purposes, John provides a series of tests for distinguishing between genuine Christians and those who falsely claim to know Christ. In response to the "new" theology, he provides us with a doctrinal test: What does the person believe about Christ? In response to the "new" morality, he provides us with a moral test: How does the person respond to the commandments of Christ? Finally, he provides us with a social test: Does the person love other Christians?

In fact, John's entire first letter is structured around these three tests, each of which appears in three separate groups, or cycles, in the letter. After the prologue (1:1-4), there is the first cycle (1:5—2:27), followed by the second (2:28—4:6) and third (4:7—5:12). Then in the conclusion (5:13-21) John again emphasizes his theme of Christian assurance.

In view of this purpose and structure, it is important to realize that the contrasts in John's letter are not between two types of Christians but between genuine Christians and those who merely claim to be Christians. For in the words of John Stott: "John's argument is double-edged. If he seeks to bring believers to the knowledge that they have eternal life, he is equally at pains to show that unbelievers have not. His purpose is to destroy the false assurance of the counterfeit as well as to confirm the right assurance of the genuine" (John Stott, *The Epistles of John* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1964], p. 52).

### **A Brief Summary of Gnosticism**

Gnosis means knowledge and gnostic one who has this knowledge. Gnosticism was the real enemy of Christianity as a heresy and still is. It was the basic philosophy of the Roman Empire and took many forms. One primary principle that ran through this philosophy was that matter of the material world was essentially evil. Only the spirit was good. Therefore, Gnosticism despised the body. It held that in the body was a spirit, like a seed in the dirty soil. The same principle in modern liberalism maintains that there is a spark of good in everyone and that each person is to develop that spark of good. Gnosticism sought to cause the "seed", the spirit within them ( the good) to grow. They tried to get rid of the evil in the body.

There were two extreme methods of accomplishing this goal as practiced by the Stoics and the Epicureans. Paul encountered these two sects of Gnostics in Acts 17:18, "And also some of the Epicurean and Stoic philosophers were conversing with him. Some were saying, "What would this idle babblers wish to say?" Others, "He seems to be a proclaimer of strange deities"—because he was preaching Jesus and the resurrection".

- The Stoics were pantheists. Pantheism teaches that god is in all things and therefore all things are god. There is a god in all waiting to be realized or let out. They taught that wise men should be free from passion and unmoved by joy or grief; that they should be submissive to natural law; and they must obey rigid rules and self-discipline.
- The Epicureans considered pleasure rather than truth the pursuit of life. Originally they sought to satisfy intellectually, not sensually the quest for "knowledge". But later they taught their followers to satisfy the body's desires so they could reach "gnosis" or knowledge.

Both considered the Incarnation impossible since God could not unite Himself with anything evil such as a body. They taught Jesus only seemed to have a body, but actually He did not. Or they taught there was both a human Jesus and a divine Christ. Divinity came upon Him at His baptism and left Him at the cross.

The main teaching affecting the early church was that since the body and spirit were separate that what the body did had no effect on the spirit. Therefore the body could do as it pleased and it would not affect the spirit. Nothing the body did was a sin, because sin is a spiritual thing!!!

Some modern day examples of Gnostic teachings include many New Age Cults, Metaphysics, and Christian Science. (Sources: "The Kingdom of the Cults" by Walter Martin and "Larson's Book of Cults," by Bob Larson)

*Adapted from the InterVarsity Press Study of 1 John*