

HOMILETICAL OUTLINE OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

The First Epistle of John establishes the dynamic theology of the believer's fellowship with God and His people. While refuting certain misconceptions about sin and worldliness John expounds the conditions upon which true fellowship with God is founded. In doing this, John educates believers in true godliness and encourages them to victorious Christian living.

- 1. Introduction - A Full Salvation 1:1-4**
 - a. The Exposition of Full Salvation is God Incarnate, 1:1-3
 - b. The Essence of Full Salvation is Fellowship, 1:3
 - c. The Expression of Full Salvation is Joy, 1:4
- 2. The Basis of True Fellowship 1:5-2:6**
 - a. The Character of God 1:5
 - b. The Character of Sin 1:6-7
 - c. Indwelling Sin 1:8-9
 - d. Actual Sin 1:10-2:2
- 3. The Test of True Fellowship 2:3-11**
- 4. A Word of Comfort 2:12-14**
- 5. A Word of Warning 2:15-17**
- 6. Antichrist and Antithesis 2:18-27**
- 7. Children of God 2:28-3:24**
 - a. His Appearing: The Hope of the Children of God 2:28-3:3
 - b. Righteousness: The Purity of the Children of God 3:4-10
 - c. Love: The Mark of the Children of God 3:11-18
 - d. The Spirit: The Assurance of the Children of God 3:19-24
- 8. A Discerning Spirit 4:1-6**
- 9. A Loving God 4:7-21**
- 10. A Victorious Christian 5:4-12**
- 11. Conclusion - A Firm Salvation 5:13-21**

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FIRST EPISTLE OF JOHN

Outlining the book

There is great difficulty in outlining this book. Unlike Paul who lays out his doctrinal framework first and builds on it a practical Christianity, John is not seeking to teach a particular line of thought, or expound a particular doctrinal thesis. John is promoting a manner of living; i.e. purity of life in the light of God and a victorious life in love and confidence in the face of a hostile world. Two main basic divisions are identified in the book with regard to the Christian life: morality and an appreciation of Christ. (Zahn 1977, 3:361) Various aspects of this Christology mixed with practical imperatives arise throughout the book but never in regular order “for he everywhere mixes teaching with exhortation.” (Calvin 1993, 156)

The Nature of the book

The first epistle of John is clearly polemical. While no heretical system is mentioned, and no one false teacher is identified and no cult is singled out in this refutation of heresy, John makes several candid declarations concerning false teaching and teachers (See e.g. 2:18-19, 4:3 *antichrists*; 2:22-23 *liars*; 2:26 *seducers*; 4:1 *false prophets*). Characteristic of John’s ministry is his positive method of refuting error by declaring truth. John answers the heretics and their divisive teaching by applying truth, he does not attack personalities or sects. While dealing with the false teachers very definitely John does it indirectly, for the individual is not the target but his teaching, and the primary cause of the epistle is to build up the saints, as he says in 1:4 “*These things write we unto you that your joy may be full*” (see also 2:1; 2:12ff).

Introduction

The last verse in this little epistle not only brings John’s teaching to an end but also sums up the intent of John in writing and identifies the quintessence of the entire message of his epistle: “*Little children, keep yourselves from idols.*” In order to find our context here and see the significance of this exhortation, we need to look at the historical setting. In the years prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD many of the disciples and apostles fled from Jerusalem and relocated in the province of Asia. The book of the Revelation would imply (1:11; 2:1) and Church Fathers are agreed that John settled in Ephesus. By the time John got to Ephesus Christianity was a growing force already

established in many Asian cities; the Church at Ephesus was probably established about fifteen years previous. Ephesus was by no accounts a religious vacuum; it was a thriving religious centre accommodating a moral and spiritual morass. It was in Ephesus that the great Temple of Diana was built, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Visitors would come from all over the Roman Empire to see this great edifice, thus providing a lucrative market for the local tradesmen especially the silversmiths who made images of Artemis (Acts 19:25).

There are two main areas that John deals with directly throughout his 1st epistle that I believe are addressed in this final exhortation.

1. The Idolatry of a Pseudo-Christianity

What made these idols more sinister and dangerous was the fact that they came in the guise of truth. Gnosticism's attitude to Christianity was friendly; they did not deny the existence of Christ; they used all the Christian vocabulary and by so doing seduced well-meaning individuals (2:26; 3:7; 4:1 *cf.* II Peter 2:1).

One commentator states that the idols that John speaks about are the fictional conceptions of God that the Gnostics had (Lenski 2001, 545). He goes on and says that by calling these conceptions "the idols" John places them in the same class with all the pagans. Pseudo-Christianity is one of the greatest dangers the Church faces today.

2. The Idolatry of a Sinful Society.

John is speaking here of a social connection with their pagan environment that is too intimate (Zahn 1977, 1:296). The Christian is to resist the spirit of this world; he is not to be conformed to the world in which he lives. The spirit of the world takes on a different form in different generations. The maxim, then, "*be not conformed to this world*" (Romans 12:2) applies to the world in the form it takes in our own generation. Resisting the spirit of the age then is a resistance peculiar to this generation (Schaeffer 1998, 11).

The word used in Ch. 5:21 means to guard, to keep watch (*φυλάσσω*), the same idea that is expressed in Acts 15:20, 29 when the Jerusalem council decreed that the Church should "abstain" (*ἀπέχομαι* "to withhold oneself") from the pollution of idols. It is used in Luke 2:8 for "*guarding the flock*" (See also Romans 12:2; I Peter 1:14; Titus 2:12).