

1 John – Overview

Author: John the son of Zebedee, one of the 12 disciples. Even though the book does not have a name associated with it, in the early church, the author was understood to be John. Just as John never mentioned his name in the Gospel of John, so John did not mention his name in 1 John. 1 John is similar to the Gospel of John in vocabulary and style. The author was a first-hand witness to Jesus Christ. He heard, saw and touched Jesus.

When: The book was probably written at the end of the first century A.D. (the 90s). The book does not mention specific events which can be tied to a timeline in history. The content of 1 John may assume a familiarity with the Gospel of John which indicates it was written after the Gospel. It is just conjecture, however.

Where: Tradition says that John was released from exile on the island of Patmos. After that he spent time in Ephesus. There is no specific evidence in 1 John that indicates that he wrote 1 John while in Ephesus, but that is the traditional place of the writing.

Recipients: Since there are no specific names mentioned in 1 John, the letter is assumed to be a general letter which was to be circulated in Ephesus and the surrounding area.

Purpose: John wrote the Gospel of John “that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John 20:31 (ESV) 1 John was written to those who had already believed in Jesus for eternal life. 1 John 5:13 says, “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.” (ESV) John wanted the recipients of the letter to know and be assured that if they had believed in Jesus Christ, the Son of God, that they had eternal life. Of course the reason there was doubt was because of false teachers who infiltrated the church and were teaching lies about Jesus and how Christians should live. Some of the lies they taught were that Jesus did not have flesh thus denying that Jesus was 100% man. John affirmed that Jesus was 100% man and 100% God. The false teachers saw the “flesh” as bad and therefore believed that God would not take on flesh. They also claimed that they did not have sin and had not sinned. By denying sin, they also denied the need for a Savior. By doing so they made the sacrificial, atoning death of Christ on the cross null and void.

John used the word “know” 42 times in 1 John. John wanted the recipients to be convinced and assured of what they had heard from John, other apostles and legitimate Christian leaders. The false teachers who spread their lies in the church had shaken some of the true believers. John gave the recipients a number of tests to determine who was telling the truth and who was lying and also who was truly of God and who was of the devil.

John proclaimed some basic truths about God and some basic truths about humanity. He made it clear that Jesus had come in the flesh. John had been with Jesus, watched him eat and drink and had touched him. Jesus was not a spirit only but he also had flesh because he became flesh at the incarnation. Humans are sinful but the blood of Jesus cleanses true believers from all sin. Jesus’ death is the atonement for our sins. While Christians do sin, it should not characterize who we are and what we do. If we sin, we should confess our sins and God will forgive us because we have an advocate in Jesus Christ. There is no eternal life apart from Jesus Christ. “And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life.” 1 John 5:11–12 (ESV)

The word for “Agape love” was used 46 times. “Beloved” (the adjective form of “Agape love”) was used 6 times. We need to love one another as God loved and loves us.