

Introduction to John's Letters

We live in a time when there are many false claims made about Christianity in general, and about Jesus in particular. Many have compromised the ethical and moral standards of Christianity, and there are some who have denied many accepted and historical truths about Jesus that are taught in Scripture. Things are not any different now than they were in the days of the Apostles and in particular the Apostle John. In the three Epistles of John, he confronts the ethical and moral issues of his day, and the spreading of false claims about the person and deity of Jesus. Studying the Gospel of John and his three letters can equip the believer today with the facts that are given from an eye witness of the person and teachings of Jesus to answer false claims made today not only of Jesus, but of the faith as well. It also provides an encouragement to the believers to adhere to and accept the truth of what we have been given by those who knew and loved Jesus from the beginning.

The Apostle John wanted to address the false teachings of those who had left the Church but continued to send out itinerant teachers to the members of the Church. These teachers were teaching that Jesus was not the Christ (2:22) and that Jesus had not come in the flesh (4:2-3). The teachers were influenced by early Gnostic teachings, although it is accepted that Gnosticism will not come into its own until the Second Century A.D. They emphasized the goodness of the spirit and the evil of the flesh, or matter. Therefore, they could not accept that Jesus was both fully God and fully man. This denial of the Incarnate Jesus undermined the message and good news of the work of Christ. However, John did not just focus on the false teachings on the person and work of Jesus, but he also addresses the false teachings on morality.

These false teachers were also denying the seriousness of sin in the believer's life (1:6-10). They told the believers that their behavior did not matter and that they could still be in fellowship with God no matter how they sinned (1:6). To confront this false teaching John lets the believers know that our behavior has serious implications on our relationship with God (2:3-4). He affirms for the believers that those who know and love God will follow his commands (2:3-6, 5:3). The Apostle moved on to address the conduct that should exist among the believers and followers of Christ.

The false teachers and their followers allowed pride to creep in and they failed to show love towards others. John reiterates Jesus' words, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciple, if you love one another." (John 13:34-35 NIV). Love for one another was non-existent in these false teachers (2:9, 11), and John takes the opportunity to remind the Christians of the words of Jesus and how they would know those who actually claimed Christ, love for one another. Love for one another was the litmus test for the genuine manifestation of true Christianity in the life of believers (3:14, 4:7-21).

As we read through the letters of John let our minds and hearts be reminded to love one another as Christ loved us. Let us love and encourage one another as they work to identify and overcome their sins in their lives. Let us put on the full confidence in the writings of the Apostle John to rely upon Jesus who is fully God and fully man to forgive us when we do sin, but has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit to strengthen us to overcome our shortcomings but also to address false teachings.