

5. the Relation of the Epistles to the Gospel of St. John.

by Daniel Steele

The First Epistle to the Gospel of St. John is a summary of the apostle's exhortations to believers to practice the precepts of Christ, emphasizing the real and perfect humanity of Jesus Christ.

Scripture: John 1:1

Topics: "Christology", "Atonement Doctrine"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the relation between the First Epistle and the Fourth Gospel, highlighting how the Epistle serves as an application to a sermon while the Gospel acts as a summary of John's sermons to those unfamiliar with Christianity. The Epistle emphasizes believers practicing Christ's precepts to guard against religious error, focusing on the humanity of Jesus Christ. There are resemblances and differences between the Epistle and the Gospel, with the Gospel emphasizing the divinity of the Logos and the Epistle focusing on the humanity of Jesus Christ. The Epistle delves into the doctrine of atonement more fully than the Gospel, reflecting the progression of doctrine in the New Testament.

Transcript

The relation of the First Epistle to the Fourth Gospel is that of an application to a sermon, Or that of a comment to a history. The Epistle presupposes that the persons addressed possessed knowledge of the Gospel communicated either by John's voice or his pen. The Gospel is a summary of his sermons to audiences ignorant of the facts and truths of Christianity. The First Epistle is a summary of his exhortations to believers to practice the precepts of Christ stated in such a way as to guard them against the evils of religious error. There are numerous and manifest resemblances, both in the thought and the form, between this Epistle and the Gospel of John. There are also striking differences. The theme of the Gospel, clearly and concisely stated in the first verse is the supreme divinity (doxa) of the Logos, who "was with God," hence distinct in personality, and who "was God," being identical with Him in nature. The burden of the Epistle is the real and perfect humanity (sarx) of Jesus Christ announced in its opening sentence, which appeals to three of the five senses, in proof that he was not a phantom, but a man composed of flesh, blood and bones, -- a veritable man, the God-man. It has been well said that the proposition demonstrated in the evangel is "Jesus is the Christ," and that proved in the Letter is "the Christ is Jesus." In the latter case the apostle presents his argument from the divine to the human, from the spiritual and ideal to the historical, the natural position of an evangelist and historian; in the former the writer argues

from the human to the divine, from the historical to the ideal and spiritual, which is the natural position of the preacher.

With respect to the doctrine of the last things there is this fundamental difference: "In the Gospel the doctrine of the 'coming' of the Lord (xxi. 22, xvi. 3) and of 'the last day' (vi. 40, 44) and of 'the judgment' (v. 28, 29), are touched upon generally. In the Epistle the 'manifestation' of Christ (ii. 28) and His 'presence' stand out as clear facts in the history of the world. He comes, even as he came 'in flesh' (2 John 7); and 'antichrists' precede his coming (1 John ii. 18,19)." (Bishop Westcott.)

Still more full and distinct in the Epistle than in the Gospel is the doctrine of the atonement. This is in harmony with the general law of the progress of doctrine in the New Testament that doctrines which are in germ form in the Gospels are fully developed in the Epistles of Paul and the other apostles. For an extended exhibition of the doctrine of atonement see concluding note to chapter fifth.

Another difference exists in the fact that the Lord's words are in the First Epistle molded by His disciple into aphorisms, their historic setting having entirely vanished. The Epistle is generally direct, abstract and destitute of rhetorical imagery. There is also what Bishop Westcott styles "a decisive difference in the atmosphere of the two books. The Epistle deals freely with the truths of the Gospel in direct conflict with the characteristic perils of his own time; in the Gospel he lives again in the presence of Christ and of the immediate enemies of Christ, while he brings out the universal significance of events and teachings not fully understood at the time."

The similarity of the Epistle and the Gospel and their dissimilarity also will be seen when we study a passage in each containing the same fundamental truth: "And this is life eternal, that they should know thee, the only true God, and him whom thou didst send, even Jesus Christ." (John xvii. 3.) Here eternal life is the progressive recognition of God through an increasing knowledge of His Son. The Gospel gives the historic revelation of God. But the Epistle goes further; "And we know that the Son of God is come, and hath given us an understanding, that we may know him that is true, and we are in him that is true, even in his Son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life." (1 John v.20.) Here we have the revelation as it has been apprehended in the life of the individual believer and of the church through the vitalizing power of the great gift of the risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, first in regeneration and secondly in perfect love.

Nearly all the versions make a difference between the meaning of Paraclete in the Gospel and in the Epistle. John is the only Scriptural writer who uses this Greek word. It occurs four times in the Gospel and is translated "Comforter," from a Latin word signifying strengthener. But the best Greek scholars insist that the form of the word indicates a passive meaning, "the near called one," or the one "called to" our aid. The word "advocate" from the Latin "ad" to and "voco," to call, is the exact equivalent of Paraclete, from "para," to, and "kaleo," to call. "Advocate" is the rendering in 1 John ii. 1, as it also should be rendered in all places in the Gospel.

The classical use of "paraclete" in this passive sense is beyond all dispute. If the term were uniformly translated "advocate" we would ever make prominent the beautiful and affecting idea that the Holy Spirit advocates God's cause with us below, and the ascended Christ pleads our cause with God above.

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