

6. Purpose and Historical Setting

by Daniel Steele

The First Epistle of John is a pastoral address that promotes Christian holiness and combats errors in philosophy and theology by emphasizing the importance of Christ's real body and the denial of the incarnate Son.

Scripture: 1 John 4:7

Topics: "Christology", "Fellowship With God"

Description

Daniel Steele preaches on the significance of the First Epistle of John, highlighting its role as the interpreter of the entire Bible, emphasizing the believer's privilege of fellowship with God and the importance of unwavering trust in Jesus. The Epistle presents a lofty ideal of the Church and the possibility of its glorious realization. Steele delves into the historical context of the Epistle, addressing the challenges faced by the early Church regarding the nature of Christ's divinity and humanity, and the importance of Christ's real incarnation for the foundation of Christianity.

Transcript

In the estimation of deeply spiritual minds the First Epistle of John holds the highest place in that series of inspired writings which constitute the Bible. In the order of divine revelations it is probably the last. It may very properly be regarded as the interpreter of the whole series. It not only awakens the highest hopes of the believer, but it also confirms and satisfies them by showing our privilege of fellowship with the choicest spirits on the earth and our cloudless and continuous communion with the Father and the Son by the Holy Spirit given to all who here and now unwaveringly trust in our risen Savior and Lord. The Epistle furnishes a lofty ideal of that Christian society or brotherhood called the Church, and it insists that its present realization is a glorious possibility. If the love of God and man which flames throughout this book were burning brightly -- not smoldering -- in the heart of every professor of faith in Christ, all secular sodalities would lose their attraction, disintegrate and disappear before the superior magnetism of the Bride of Christ the Church.

While in all versions of the New Testament this product of John's pen is called an epistle, it has no characteristics of an epistle. It has no date, no place of writing, no address, no salutation, no subscription, no trace of the author except by inference and no hint of any special destination. Yet it is brimful and running over with personal feeling such as would characterize a large and warm heart of a retired, aged pastor writing a farewell, pastoral address to his beloved flock exposed to destructive errors. It is

commonly believed that this Epistle and the Fourth Gospel were written at the same time, or nearly the same, in the last decade of the first century, probably at Ephesus, after the destruction of Jerusalem. The tone of it is not dread of the hostility of the world, but of its seductions. The historical setting of this book must have been when the battles between the law and the gospel had already become ancient history. But the still more vital question was pressing for an answer -- the Person and work of our Lord Jesus Christ. Some took the advanced, liberalistic view of today, that our God-man had no valid claim to supreme divinity, that He was a mere man, while others admitting His Godhead, denied the reality of His humanity and pronounced Him a mere phantom, that He only seemed to be a man with a material organism. These were called the Docetoe or seemers. Still another class, Cerinthus and his followers, supposed that Jesus had two human parents and was a common man till His baptism, when the divinity was united with Him in so loose a way that it left Him before He died. John living to see the time when both the divinity and the humanity of his Master were publicly denied wrote the Fourth Gospel to meet the first error, and this pastoral address to counteract the second. To protect the church against these deadly errors, John does not directly assail them by name, but he indirectly meets them by unfolding the truth respecting Christ's person and mission. He does not formally construct an argument, but rather announces the truths intuitively seen and felt. He repeats with emphasis that the Son of God came in the flesh. This is the key of this Epistle. John shows that the bottom drops out of Christianity if Christ's body was not real. The outcome would be a phantom Savior, nailed to a sham cross, dying only a seeming death, and then rising from the dead only in appearance.

No wonder that John should declare that the denial of the incarnate Son amounts to a denial of the Father.

In modern times we have substantially the same errors to combat. Realism in philosophy reduces Christianity to mere humanitarianism, while idealism, such as the so-called Christian Science, when applied to the incarnation, makes it a mere seeming. Thus the corner stone of the Christian evidences, the resurrection of Christ, is undermined, while the central Christian doctrine, the atonement, on which all the hopes of the penitent believer are built, evaporates in thin air, because there was no real body to suffer and die. In addition to these pernicious errors which would subvert fundamentals, we in modern times must oppose a most deadly perversion of a passage in this very Epistle making the saintly John teach the monstrous contradiction that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin, but if any testifies to the experience of such a perfect riddance of sin, he deceives himself and the truth is not in him. Thus John, who writes this pastoral address, "that ye sin not," is made to plead for continuance in sin and to rate as deceived, if not deceivers, all teachers of the doctrine of entire sanctification in this life and all professors of its blessed experience.

To present a harmonious interpretation of the First Epistle of John is our purpose, in order that it may realize the aim of the beloved apostle, the promotion of Christian holiness on the earth.

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