

BIBLE SERIES: "EXPLORING OUR AWESOME BIBLE"

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1 JOHN 1-2 JOHN'S THREE TESTS FOR DETECTING FALSE TEACHERS

We now come to the *first epistle of John*, which continues to develop the similar themes found in James and especially in 2 Peter. This epistle was probably written in Ephesus around A.D. 95.

By way of reminder, having the epistles of the apostles in our Bibles in the wrong order (starting with Paul instead of James), we *begin* where we should end. When the epistles are studied in their inspired order, the biblical doctrines develop in a natural way from the most general to the most specific. If they could be compared to a tree, James, the most basic, would be the *roots*, then Peter, John and Jude would be *trunk* of the tree and Paul would be the *branches*, or the details.

Thus, with the current wrong order of the placement of the epistles, it forces us to study first "the small doctrinal branches," where one can get confused. As Peter had warned about Paul's epistles, "In *all* his epistles...are some things *hard to understand*, which untaught and unstable people *twist* to their own destruction, as they do also *the rest* of the Scriptures" (2 Pet. 3:16).

Therefore, John's epistles continue *developing* the "*doctrinal trunk*" and *complementing* what was already given by James and Peter.

Now, the first thing to notice about 1 John is he doesn't have to identify himself since he is so well known by all the brethren.

So, he goes right to the heart of the matter and says: "That which was *from the beginning*, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and *our hands have handled*, concerning *the Word of life*—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you *that eternal life* which was *with the Father* and was *manifested to us*—that which we have seen and heard we *declare* to you, that *you also* may have *fellowship* with us; and truly our fellowship is *with the Father* and *with His Son Jesus Christ*. And these things we write to you that your *joy* may be full" (1 John 1:1-4).

Since John was quite old by now and probably the only apostle left alive among the Twelve, he doesn't have to mention their names and directly goes to the source of their authority. He testifies he

personally was with Jesus, saw him, heard him and even felt the wounds of the resurrected Christ, who had "eternal life" along with the Father, showing He wasn't ever a created being.

So, in the Bible there are three "beginnings." The first is in *Genesis 1:1*, which says God *created* the universe "in the beginning." The second is in John 1:1, which tells us of the *relationship* between the Father and the Word "in the beginning." And now, the third time, John speaks of the relationship the apostles had with the risen "Word" – Jesus Christ, which they saw, heard and handled His body -- the same "Word" who was "in the beginning." What a great authority they had to preach God's Word! So John did not receive these truths second-hand, but directly from Jesus, "the Word," so he can speak with such firm conviction.

Peter also made the same point when he said, "For we did not follow cunningly devised fables when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but were *eyewitnesses of His majesty*" (2 Peter 1:16). All these apostles were eyewitnesses of these events; hence, they want to share that *true faith* with us.

John explains the purpose of this epistle is for them to believe the apostles' teachings and develop a closer relationship with God the Father and Jesus Christ, so they won't be deceived. They can then counter the false teachers who were twisting the apostles' teachings through a mixture of lawlessness and a false grace, undermining the faith of many, who are leaving the true church.

Also, here is an important *proof text* that shows no such relationship exists with a *suppose third person*, as they say of the Holy Spirit, or of a Trinity. John emphasizes: "our *fellowship* is truly *with the Father* and *with His Son Jesus Christ*" (1 John 1:3). If a third divine person really did exist, but was not part of this fellowship, it would be a great insult!

John then explains some of the attributes of God the Father and Jesus Christ so we can have full confidence in Their love. He says, "This is the message which we have heard from Him and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship

with Him, and walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. But if we walk in the light as He is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin. If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar, and His word is not in us. My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate (Gk. *parakletos*) with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous. And He Himself is the propitiation (Gk. *hilasmos* -- sacrifice) for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (1 Jn. 1:5-2:2). Notice that the "*parakletos*" is none other than Jesus Christ, not a Holy Spirit. As 1 Tim. 2:5 says, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and man...Christ Jesus."

Here we see the first heresy that John attacks, also the same as in James and Peter. It is the false belief that one doesn't have to repent of sins since they were automatically forgiven by a cheap grace. This is taught today as "once saved, always saved."

Now, many Bible commentators are perplexed about who were these false teachers. Most think it refers to the Gnostics, but this movement largely arose later than the date of this epistle.

However, the Bible itself gives us the answer to who these heretics were. The New Testament identifies the first and most dangerous heretic as Simon Magus, who wanted to be one of the apostles and was willing to pay for the privilege (Acts 8:18-19). Peter rejected him, and he was expelled from the Church. Later history relates that Simon formed his own "Christian" organization based on lawlessness and a false grace that would later become, among other sects, the Catholic Church.

It is ironic that the very things John is attacking are the same things that second century writers attribute to Simon Magus. In Philip Schaff's *History of the Church*, he comments on Simon Magus: "The author, or first representative of this baptized heathenism, according to *the uniform testimony of Christian antiquity*, is Simon Magus, who unquestionably adulterated Christianity with

pagan ideas and practices, and gave himself out, in a pantheistic style for an emanation of God" (Section: *Apostolic Christianity*, Vol. 2, p. 566).

About hundred years after the death of Simon Magus, Irenaeus wrote: "He, then, not putting faith in God a whit the more, set himself eagerly to contend *against the apostles*, in order that he himself might seem to be a wonderful being, and applied himself with still greater zeal to the study of the whole magic art, that he might the better bewilder and overpower multitudes of men. Such was his procedure in the reign of Claudius Caesar (A.D. 41-54), by whom also he is said to have been honored with a statue, on account of his magical power. This man, then, was glorified by many as if he were a god; and he taught that it was *himself who appeared among Jews as the Son*, but descended in Samaria as the Father while he came to other nations in the character of the Holy Spirit. He represented himself, in a word, as being *the loftiest of all powers*, that is, the Being who is the Father over all, and he allowed himself to be called by whatsoever title men were pleased to address him" (The *Ante Nicene Fathers*, "Against Heresies," Book 1, chap. 23).

These testimonies are a key to understanding John's epistle, because by the evidence, it was mainly Simon Magus and his followers to whom John refers. This is why John mentions that one should be concerned about his sins and confess them before God the Father, or he will not receive forgiveness. According to John, the first test of a true minister is that *he knows what sin is* (the transgression of God's holy law, 1 Jn. 3:4 KJV) and that it must be confessed. So grace by itself does not automatically forgive sin.

Peter also attacked the same problem when he said of these false teachers: "For when they speak great swelling words of emptiness, they allure through the lusts of the flesh, through lewdness, the ones who have actually escaped from those who live in error. While they promise them liberty, they themselves are slaves of corruption...to turn from the holy commandment delivered to them" (2 Pet. 2:18-21). Jude is even more explicit in saying of such false teachers: "For certain men have crept in unnoticed...ungodly men, who *turn the grace of our God into lewdness* and deny [by their works]

the only Lord God and our Lord Jesus Christ" (Jude 4).

Jesus also identifies them in Revelation as false apostles, (as far as we know, Simon Magus was the only one who dared claim to be an apostle). He says, "I know your works, your labor, your patience, and that you cannot bear those who are evil. And you have tested those who say they are apostles and are not, and have found them liars" (Rev. 2:2). This is precisely what John is doing in this epistle by testing and unmasking them.

He then gives the second test to distinguish a true minister from a false one: "Now by this we know that we know Him, if we keep His commandments. He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him. He who says he abides in Him ought himself also to walk just as He walked" (1 John 2:3-6).

Thus, anyone who teaches that a Christian should not obey God's laws or that these have been "done away," the Bible tells us that he, "is a liar and the truth is not in him." John shows here that a true minister of God has to teach respect for *all* the Ten Commandments, just as Jesus Christ and all the apostles did, and "walk just as He walked."

Next comes *the third test* to distinguish a true minister or brethren from a false one: "Brethren, I write no new commandment to you, but an old commandment which you have had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word which you heard from the beginning. Again, a new commandment I write to you, which thing is true in Him and in you, because the darkness is passing away, and the true light is already shining. He, who says he is in the light, and hates his brother, is in darkness until now. He who loves [Gk. *agape*] his brother abides in the light, and there is no cause for stumbling in him. But he who hates his brother is in darkness and walks in darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (1 John 2:7-11).

This has to do with having *agape love* for the brethren. It means keeping God's "old" or O.T. commandment, as amplified by Jesus' love for His followers. It was the commandment Christ Himself

had said: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Mt. 22:39). Now, Christ added a new element to the Old Testament commandment when He gave it to the brethren. He said, this is My commandment, that you love one another, as I have loved you" (John 13:12). He magnified that ancient commandment by now having to love the brethren in the same way Jesus did. This type of *agape* love can only truly be fulfilled by having God's Spirit in you.

The *Wiersbe Bible Commentary* mentions, "This commandment [to love your neighbor as yourself] is not only an old commandment, but there is a sense in which it is also new. When Jesus was here, He not only taught His disciples to love one another, but He gave them a living example of what He meant. His life was characterized by love for others. The commandment was thus true in Him when He was here on earth. But now there is a sense in which the Old Commandment is new. In this stage, it is not only true in the Lord Jesus, but in believers also. These Christians had formerly been heathens, living in hatred and passion. Now they illustrated and embodied the great law of love in their lives" (note on 1 John 2:8).

John provides this third test because he is very concerned about the infiltrations of false brethren and teachers, mostly from the group of Simon Magus. Because of this, some members were no longer attending Church and have stopped showing love toward the brethren. They now believe false teachings, such as "the law has been done away," or "once saved, always saved" (which is the false doctrine called "eternal security").

But if one is truly converted, he will love, tolerate, forgive and help the brethren, for the love of God the Father and Jesus are in them. As Paul said, "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do" (Col. 3:12-13).

So here are the *three tests* John also gives to us in these troubled times. How are we doing?