

THE HERESY EXPLAINED AND BEING REFUTED IN 1JOHN
Necessary background for a study of the epistle

The Epistles of John
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The occasion for its writing was the rise of a dangerous heresy later known as gnosticism. It can be inferred from later gnosticism – as well as from the arguments in the epistle – that there were those of that day who denied the reality of Christ’s incarnation.

Gnostics believed that matter was evil in itself and that consequently God could have no direct contact with it. Hence they argued that God and man could not have been actually united in Jesus Christ. Either Jesus was merely a man who had been “adopted” by God’s Spirit, or else he was a manifestation of God without a real human personality or body.

John’s insistence in the Gospel that “the Word was made flesh” (1:14) contradicts either form of the denial that Christ was both fully divine and fully human.

John regarded this heresy as a denial of all that was of any value in Christianity and wrote this epistle (1Jno.) as a refutation of it. Perhaps there is no document whose teachings would form a more effective and thorough antidote for the evils, both in doctrine and dlife, of our time than 1John.

This Epistle of five brief chapters sets forth in clear and pungent style the fundamental truths of Christianity. It sets forth these truths, not to construct a logical system of thought and thus satisfy man’s speculative instinct, but to combat moral error and thus help Christians in their lives. It is truth applied dto life.

The error John was refuting was a system of thought that lacked moral earnestness – the central failure of our own time as well as of John’s day. What our day needs is not so much sharpened intellects, but quickened consciences; not logical acumen, but moral discernment.

Because God is light and in him is no darkness, thus God is a moral personality, John saw the world as a moral order, man as a responsible moral being, sin as guilt, redemption as moral and spiritual regeneration, and the Christian’s life as the expression of love to God and man in deeds, not just words, which was contrary to the thought and action of the heresy with which he was dealing. Such a view as this is the deepest need of our times.

Notice some of the characteristics of John’s writings. One characteristic is that he expresses profound thought in simple words. He uses such brief, but pregnant, words as light, life, truth, love, darkness, lie, and so on. These words express the realities of the moral and spiritual world, yet they are simple words. He did not engage in obscure language to express himself.

Another characteristic of his style is that he uses the method of contrast, regularly setting opposites over against each other and making clear the principle that he wants to show by giving its opposite. In this way the contrasts light and darkness, truth and error, God and the devil, sin and righteousness, love and hate, and life and death. He puts things in strong, emphatic terms. In discussing moral and spiritual principles he knows no middle ground. A thing is either white or black; he knows no intermediate colors.

Another characteristic of his style of writing is repetition. He sets forth only a few ideas, but these he repeats over and over again. Twice in 1John he says that God is love. Several times he gives love as the evidence that one is born of God. In the Gospel the idea that faith is the condition of possessing eternal life is repeated numbers of times. It known as the “Gospel of Belief.”

He also is fond of parallelism in his writings. Sometimes his parallel statements use contrast; some are a repetition. As an example of contrast, he says, “God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1Jno.1:5). Here the idea is repeated in the form of a parallel contrast.

In the last three verses of the first chapter, there are three repetitions in parallel statements: V.8; V.9; V.10

Another characteristic is that he dwells on the moral and spiritual elements of the faith of Jesus Christ and his church rather than the external and formal. That is, he does not have much to say about the church and the ordinances, little about church officers and the conduct of public worship; he dwells on the union of the believer with Christ, on faith and love, and on prayer and knowledge. He deals with the abiding, eternal verities. And this, of course, because of the heresy with which he is dealing.

The heresy with which he was dealing was denying the reality of an incarnation. It denied that god could come into contact with matter because, as it held, matter is essentially evil. Hence, since Christ is divine, he cannot be really human and have a genuine body. So they were saying that the body of Jesus was not real; it was only apparent.

Gnostics were denying that there was any divine sacrifice for the salvation of world. They insisted that God could not suffer. Also there is the possibility of denying the need of the cleansing blood on the ground that there is no sin from which to be cleansed. That one could walk in darkness and still have fellowship with God. That one could live such a life and yet be without sin.

They were denying that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh. They denied that Jesus Christ became man and continues to be man, the eternal Son of God; that he had become human for all the ages to come.

They disjoined Jesus and the Christ. They did not believe that Jesus Christ “came through water and blood”. They affirmed the water of Jesus’ baptism but denied the blood of the cross. They contended that a spirit being, Christ, came on Jesus at his baptism but left him before his death on the cross. The Son of God, therefore, did not die on the cross. Only the man Jesus died.

They claimed some kind of initiation into the mysteries of the universe that gave them an exclusive insight into its deep and hidden secrets.

There seems to have been something in gnosticism that encouraged a loose attitude toward sin.\

They were denying that Jesus was the eternal Son of God made flesh to reveal God and save man.