

The Epistle of I John: Seminar Sections

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Summary

The Epistle of I John: "Gnosticism"

Notes:

Some Background of Gnosticism

In the First Epistle of John there is a distinct polemical purpose. There is no book of the New Testament which is more purposeful in its attack of error. There is "the spirit of error" (1 Jn 4:6), opposing the Spirit of truth. "Many false prophets are gone out into the world" (1 Jn 4:1), and this from the church itself, "They went out from us, but they were not of us" (1 Jn 2:19); and these false prophets are distinctly named "the antichrist" (1 Jn 2:22) and "the liar" (same place), and "the deceiver and the antichrist" (2 Jn 1:7). This peril, against which the apostle writes, and from which he seeks to defend the church, was Gnosticism, as is proved by what is said again and again in the epistle of the characteristics of this insidious and deadly teaching. (*"The Gnostic Heresies" by J. B. Lightfoot, a renowned British theologian and scholar of the 19th century.*)

(1) Gnostic Claims

The Gnostic claim to knowledge throws light upon many passages in this epistle. John refers to his opponents' using such phrases as "I know God," "I abide in Christ," "I am in the light." These lofty claims were made by persons who did not love their brethren on earth, who did not walk in Christ's footsteps, and who were destitute of love. The apostle therefore describes these lofty claims as false, because those who made them possessed neither love nor obedience.

In contrast to these Gnostic claims--for those who made them were no other than the early Gnostics--John shows how the Christ of history is the Christ of experience: for those to whom he is writing know Christ, who is from the beginning, and they know the Father. "We 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 Jn 5:20). This knowledge of God and communion with Him are attained, not by Gnostic speculation, but by the obedience of faith, the outcome of which is brotherly love and a life in which the Christian walks even as Christ did (1 Jn 2:6). And thus also obedience and brotherly love are the test of the profession which any man may make that he knows God. "Every one also that doeth righteousness is begotten of him," (1 Jn 2:29); "Whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother" (1 Jn 3:10). (*Ibid*)

(2) Its Loveless Nature

Gnosticism was distinguished by an unethical, loveless intellectualism. This seems to be the explanation of the false teaching against which this epistle is directed. The apostle describes the dry head-knowledge which left the heart and life untouched by love, and which led men, while they professed to love God, nevertheless to remain destitute of love to their fellow-men. (They did not fold their human brethren to their hearts, they were dead to the fact that where pity dwells, the love of God dwells also. In Gnosticism knowledge was in itself the supreme end and purpose of life, the sum of highest good to which a man could attain, the crown of life. The system was loveless to the core. (*Ibid*))

(3) Docetism

Now, when the attempt was made to amalgamate these Gnostic ideas with the Christian faith, the inevitable result was Docetism. Just because God cannot have any immediate contact with matter, therefore the incarnation of Almighty God in the person of the Lord Jesus Christ is inconceivable. From this position it is, of course, only a step to deny that the incarnation and the true human life of Christ ever took place at all. (*"The Gnostic Religion" by Hans Jonas. The book, first published in 1958*)

(4) The Antichrist

The Antichrist of the First Epistle of John is docetic Gnosticism. The soul of the apostle rushes onward, with glowing zeal for the honor of his Master whom Gnosticism dishonored, to identify personally the historical Jesus with the Divine Being, "the Son of God," "the Word of Life," "the Christ." "Who is the liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, even he that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that confesseth the Son hath the Father also" (1 Jn 2:22,23). It should be noted that the last clause in 1 Jn 2:23, which is printed in italics in the King James Version, is restored in the Revised Version (British and American) to its rightful position in the original text. "Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: and every spirit that confesseth not Jesus is not of God: and this is the spirit of the antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it cometh; and now it is in the world already" (1 Jn 4:2,3). (*J.B. Lightfoot*)

(5) Its Antinomian Side

The antinomian side of Gnosticism is not so directly referred to in the First Epistle of John as Docetism is; but evidences are manifest that the apostle had it clearly before him. "Little children," he writes, "let no man lead you astray: he that doeth righteousness is righteous, even as he is righteous: he that doeth sin is of the devil" (1 Jn 3:7,8). And these were the methods by which those deceivers endeavored to lead the members of the church astray. They alleged that sin was a thing indifferent in itself. It made no difference to the spiritual man whether he sinned with his body or not. It is for this reason that the apostle, in opposing those teachers, insists that "sin is lawlessness" (1 Jn 3:4); "All unrighteousness is sin" (1 Jn 5:17); "Whosoever is begotten of God doeth no sin" (1 Jn 3:9); "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother" (1 Jn 3:10). The whole passage presupposes, as familiar to its readers, a doctrine of moral indifferentism, according to which the status of the 'spiritual' man is not to be tested by the commonplace facts of moral conduct." (*J.B. Lightfoot, "The Tests of Life, 34"*)

Additional notes: (*From Britannica.com*)

Docetism, (from Greek *dokein*, "to seem"), Christian [heresy](#) and one of the earliest Christian sectarian doctrines, affirming that [Christ](#) did not have a real or natural body during his life on earth but only an apparent or phantom one. Though its [incipient](#) forms are [alluded](#) to in the New Testament, such as in the [Letters of John](#) (e.g., 1 John 4:1–3; 2 John 7), Docetism became more fully developed as an important doctrinal position of Gnosticism, a religious dualist system of belief arising in the 2nd century ad which held that matter was evil and the spirit good and claimed that salvation was attained only through [esoteric](#) knowledge, or gnosis. The heresy developed from

speculations about the imperfection or essential impurity of matter. More thoroughgoing Docetists asserted that Christ was born without any participation of matter and that all the acts and sufferings of his life, including the Crucifixion, were mere appearances. They consequently denied Christ's Resurrection and Ascension into heaven. Milder Docetists attributed to Christ an [ethereal](#) and heavenly body but disagreed on the degree to which it shared the real actions and sufferings of Christ. Docetism was attacked by all opponents of Gnosticism, especially by Bishop Ignatius of Antioch in the 2nd century. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Docetism>)

Antinomianism, (Greek *anti*, "against"; *nomos*, "law"), [doctrine](#) according to which Christians are freed by grace from the necessity of obeying the [Mosaic Law](#). The antinomians rejected the very [notion](#) of obedience as legalistic; to them the good life flowed from the inner working of the [Holy Spirit](#). In this circumstance they appealed not only to [Martin Luther](#) but also to Paul and Augustine. The ideas of antinomianism had been present in the [early church](#), and some Gnostic heretics believed that freedom from law meant freedom for license. The doctrine of antinomianism, however, grew out of the Protestant controversies on the law and the gospel and was first attributed to Luther's collaborator, [Johann Agricola](#). It also appeared in the Reformed branch of [Protestantism](#). The left-wing [Anabaptists](#) were accused of antinomianism, both for theological reasons and also because they opposed the cooperation of [church and state](#), which was considered necessary for law and order. For similar reasons, in the 17th century, Separatists, Familists, Ranters, and Independents in England were called antinomians by the established churches. In [New England](#), [Anne Hutchinson](#) was accused of the doctrine when she said that the churches were preaching "the [covenant](#) of works." The Evangelical movement at the end of the 18th century produced its own antinomians who claimed an inner experience and a "new life," which they considered the true source of good works. (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/antinomianism>)

The Epistle of I John:

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Session 1A:

A Testimony Concerning the Word of Life

1:1 That which was from *the* beginning, that which we have heard, that which we have seen with our eyes, that which we have observed and our hands have touched concerning the word of life, **2** (and the life was made known and we saw and testify and report to you the eternal life which was with the father and made known to us) **3** that which we have seen and heard, we also report to you, so that you also might have a partnership with us. But also, the partnership we have with the father and with his son Jesus Christ. **4** And we write these things, so that our joy might become and remain complete.

Session 1B:

Walking in Light –vs- Walking in Darkness

1:5 And this is the message which we heard from him and report to you, that God is light and there is no darkness in him. **6** If we say that we have a partnership with him and we walk in the darkness, we lie and do not do the truth, **7** but if we will walk in the light, as he is in the light, we will have a partnership with one another and the blood of Jesus his son cleanses us from all sins. **8** If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. **9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just, in order to forgive our sins and cleanse us from all injustice. **10** If we say that we have never sinned we make him a liar and his word is not in us.

We Have a PARAKLETE

2:1 My children, I write these things to you so that you might not sin. And if anyone might sin, we have a **PARAKLETE** with the father, Jesus Christ, a just man; **2** and he is a **HILASMOS** for our sins, and not concerning our sins only but also concerning the whole world. **3** If we keep his commands then by this, we know that we know him. **4** The one who might say, "I know him", and does not keep his commands, is a liar and there is no truth in this person; **5** but whoever might keep his word, truly in this person the love of God **is complete**, *and* by this we know that we are in him. **6** The one claiming to remain in him ought also [thus] to walk just as that man (Jesus) walked.

It's All About Knowing What To Love And What To Hate

2:7 Beloved, I do not write to you a new command, but an old one which **you were having** from the beginning; the old command is the word which you have heard. **8** I write to you a new command again, which is genuine in him and in you, because the darkness disappears and the true light already shines. **9** The one claiming to be in the light and is hating his brother is in the darkness until now. **10** The one loving his brother remains in the light and there is no “**stumbling block**” in him. **11** But the one hating his brother is in the darkness he walks in the darkness and he does not know where he goes, because the darkness has blinded his eyes. **12** I write to you children because your sins are forgiven on account of his name. **13** I write to you fathers because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you young men because you have defeated the evil one. **14** I wrote to you children because you have known the father. I wrote to you fathers because you have known the one who is from the beginning. I wrote to you young men, because you are strong and the word of God remains in you and you have defeated the evil one. **15** Do not love the world nor the things of the world. If anyone loves the world the love of the father is not in him; **16** because everything in the world, the **desires** of the flesh, and of the eyes, and the arrogance about the possessions one has in life, is not from the father but from the world. **17** Both the world passes away and the **desires** of it, but the one doing the will of (the) God remains forever.

The Antichrist: ANYONE Who Does Not Remain In The Truth

2:18 Children, it is *the* last hour, and just as you have heard that an antichrist is coming, also now **many have become antichrists**, from this we know that it is *the* last hour. **19** They went out from us, but they were not out of us; for if they were out of us they would have remained with us; but so that they might be shown because they are all not out of us. **20** And **you have a KRISMA** from the holy one and all of you know. **21** I did not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it and because every lie is not out of the truth. **22** Who is the liar except the one denying that Jesus is not the Christ? This is the antichrist; the one **denying** the father and the son. **23** Every one denying the son neither has the father, the one confessing the son also has the father. **24** Let that which you heard from the beginning remain in you! If that which you heard from the beginning remains in you, you also will remain in the son and in the father. **25** And this is the promise which he proclaimed to you, eternal life. **26** I wrote these things to you concerning the ones deceiving you. **27** And the KRISMA which you received from him, remains in you and you have no need in order that someone might teach you, but as his KRISMA teaches you concerning all things and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you must remain in it.

2:28 And now, children, remain in him, so that if he is revealed we might have confidence and not be shamed from him in his coming. **29** If you see that he is just, you also know that everyone **doing justice** is born out of him.

3:1 Behold how great a **love** the father has given to us, so that we might be called children of God, and we are. On account of this the world does not know us, because it has not known him. **2** Beloved, now we are children of God, and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be. We know that if he is revealed, we shall be like him, because we shall see him just as he is. **3** And everyone having this hope on the basis of him **sets himself apart as "special for God"**, just as that man (Jesus) is "*special for God*". **4** Everyone doing sin is doing lawlessness, **because [the] sin is [the] lawlessness**. **5** And you know that that man (Jesus) was revealed so that he might take up the sins, and there is no sin in him. **6** Everyone remaining in him does not sin; everyone sinning has not seen him neither has he known him. **7** Children, let no one deceive you; the one **doing justice is just, just as that man (Jesus) is just**; **8** the one doing [the] sin is out of the devil, because the devil sins from *the* beginning. Unto this the son of God was revealed so that he might destroy the works of the devil. **9** Everyone being born out of God does not do sin, because *that which is sown of him* (God) remains in him, and he is not able **to continue** to sin, because he is born out of God. **10** In this the children of God and the children of the devil are made known; everyone not **doing justice** is not out of God, also the one not loving his brother.

Session 2B:

We've Got To Love One Another In The True Way!

3:11 Because this is the truth which you have heard from [the] beginning, so that we might love one another, **12** not just as Cain who was out of the evil one and killed his brother; and for what reason did he kill him? Because his works were **evil** and his brother's were just. **13** And do not be amazed, brothers, if the world hates you. **14** **We** know that **we have passed** from death into life, because we love the brothers; the one not loving remains in death. **15** everyone hating his brother is a man-slayer, and you know that every man-slayer does not have eternal life remaining in him. **16** In this **we have known** the love, because that man (Jesus) laid down **his life** on behalf of us; and we ought to lay down **our lives** in behalf of the brothers. **17** But whoever has **the possessions of the world** and sees his brother having a need and shuts off his **compassion** from him, how does the love of God remain in him? **18** Children, let us not love by word neither by the tongue, but by work and truth!

3:19 And by **this** we shall know that we are of the truth, and in the presence of him we shall assure our heart, **20** that if our heart **condemns** us, that [the] God is greater than our heart and he knows all things. **21** Beloved, if our heart does not condemn, then we have confidence toward [the] God **22** and whatever we might ask we receive from him, because we are keeping his commands and are doing the things which are pleasing in his presence. **23** And this is his command, that we should believe in the name of his son Jesus Christ and that we should love one another, just as he gave a command to us. **24** And the one keeping his [God's] commands remains in him and he [God] in him; and in this we know that he remains in us, by the spirit which he gave to us.

Separating Truth From Deception

4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit **but test to prove** whether the spirits are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. **2** By this we know the spirit of [the] God; every spirit which **confesses** Jesus Christ having come in the flesh is from [the] God, **3** and every spirit does not confess Jesus is not from [the] God; and this is the **antichrist**, which you heard is coming, and now is already in the world. **4** Children, you are out of God and you have **overcome** them, because greater is the one in you than the one in the world. **5** They are out of the world, *and* on account of this they speak and the world hears them. **6** We are out of [the] God, *and* the one knowing [the] God hears us, whoever is not out of [the] God does not hear us. By this we know the spirit of truth and the spirit of **deception**.

Session 3A:

We Learn True AGAPE From God Because God Is AGAPE!

4:7 Beloved, let us **AGAPE** one another, because love is out of [the] God, and everyone loving has been born out of [the] God and he knows [the] God. **8** The one who not loving has not known [the] God, because [the] God is AGAPE! **9** In this the love of [the] God was shown in us, because [the] God has sent his **unique** son into the world so that we might live through him. **10** In this is love, not that we have loved [the] God but that he loved us and sent his son as a **payment** concerning our sins. **11** Beloved, if thus [the] God AGAPED us, we also ought to AGAPE one another. **12** No one has yet seen God. If we love one another, [the] God remains in us and his love is completed in us. **13** In this we know that we remain in him and he in us, because of his spirit he has given to us. **14** And we have seen and testify to you that the father has sent the son as savior of the world. **15** Whoever might confess that Jesus is the son of [the] God, [the] God remains in him and he in [the] God. **16** And we have known and have believed the love which [the] God has in us. [The] God is love, and the one remaining in the love remains in [the] God and [the] God remains in him. **17** In this the love has been completed with us, so that we might have confidence in the day of judgment, because just as **that man (Jesus)** is also we are in this world. **18** There isn't **fear** in love but the complete love casts out the fear, because fear has to do

with punishment, and the one fearing has not been made complete in the love. **19** Let us AGAPE, because he first AGAPED us! **20** If anyone says, "I love [the] God", and hates his brother, he is a liar! For the one not loving his brother whom he has seen, is not able to love [the] God whom he has not seen! **21** And we have this command from him, so that the one loving [the] God might also love his brother.

What Is The Victory Which Conquers The World?

5:1 Everyone believing that Jesus is the Christ has been born from God, and everyone loving the one having given birth also loves the one born from him. **2** In this we know that we love God's children, whenever we love [the] God and *whenever* we do his commands. **3** For this is the love **for [the] God**, that we might keep his commands, and his commands are not difficult. **4** Because everyone who has been born from God "**victories**" the world, and this is the **victory** which has "**victoried**" the world, our faith. **5** And who is the one "**victorizing**" the world except the one believing that Jesus is the son of God?

How Does A Person Get Eternal Life?

5:6 This is the one who came through water and blood, Jesus Christ, not by the water alone but by the water and by the blood; and the spirit is the witness, because the spirit is the truth, **7** Because the ones testifying are three, **8** the spirit, and the water and the blood, and the three are into the one. **9** If we receive the testimony of man, the testimony of God is greater; because it is the testimony of [the] God that he has testified concerning his son. **10** The one believing in the son of God has the testimony in himself, the one not believing [the] God has made him a liar, because he has not believed in the testimony which [the] God has testified concerning his son. **11** And this is the testimony, that [the] God has given eternal life to us, and this same life is in his son. **12** The one having the son has the life; the one not having the son of God does not have the life.

Session 3B:

Living With The Knowledge of Having Eternal Life!

5:13 **These things** I wrote to you, to the ones believing on the name of the son of [the] God, so that you might know that you have eternal life. **14** And this is the confidence which we have with him that whatever we might **request** according to his will he hears us. **15** And if we know that he hears us, that which we might request, we know that we have the "requested things" which we have requested from him. **16** If someone might see his brother sinning a sin not **to death**, he might request he shall give him life, to the ones sinning not to death. There is a sin to death; not concerning that I say that he might request. **17** Every **injustice** is sin, and there is a sin not to death. **18** We know that every one having been born out of [the] God does not sin, but the one that was born out of [the] God (Jesus) keeps him and **the evil one** does not **touch** him. **19** We know that we are out of [the] God and the whole world is in the power of the evil one. **20** But we know that the son of [the] God has come and has given to us understanding so that we might know the true one, and we are in the true one, in his son Jesus Christ. This is the true God and eternal life. **21** Children, guard yourselves from the **idols**.