

Interpreting 1 John

Interpreting 1 John is troublesome to some because of statements that appear to be tests or conditions. The prevailing view among commentators is that the purpose of these tests is to determine if someone is saved eternally or not. Another view, not as common, is that the tests do not determine one's eternal salvation, but one's experience of fellowship with God. Are the tests of 1 John intended to examine one's eternal relationship to God or examine one's intimate fellowship with God? The answer has important ramifications for one's understanding of the gospel and consequently, one's assurance of salvation.

The tests stated

The tests are spread throughout the epistle. Here are some examples of the conditions stated in these tests:

- 2:4 He who says, "I know Him," and does not keep His commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.
- 2:9 He who hates his brother is in darkness.
- 3:8 He who sins is of the devil.
- 3:10 Whoever does not practice righteousness or love his brother is not of God.
- 3:14 He who does not love his brother abides in death.
- 4:8 He who does not love does not know God.

The purpose of the epistle

Our understanding of the tests must agree with the purpose of the epistle. A number of times in 1 John we read "these things I [or we] write [or have written] to you..." (1:4; 2:1, 26; 5:13). It would be natural for any author to put the purpose statement for the entire book at the beginning (The references in 2:1, 26, and 5:13 seem to refer to what immediately precedes each of those statements). If so, then 1:4 declares that the purpose of the book is to bring the readers into the full joy of a shared fellowship with the apostles and with the Lord (1:3). Fellowship (literally "sharing") refers not to the establishment of a relationship, but to growing more intimate in that relationship. In other words, John's purpose is not to establish a new relationship, but to enhance an existing one. It seems obvious that the readers already had established a relationship with John and the apostles, just as they also had established a relationship with God.

It appears John wrote to protect the readers' experience of fellowship with him and his apostolic circle and with God because false teachers among them denied that the readers possessed eternal life (cf. 2:25-26; 5:13), which of course would undermine any existing fellowship with the apostles and with God. The experiential tests then address the quality of this horizontal and vertical fellowship. But for assurance of their eternal life, John directs the readers to the promise and testimony of God (2:25; 5:9-12).

The readers addressed

The existing relationship of John to the readers and their relationship to God are demonstrated in how John addresses the readers in endearing Christian terms. He calls them little children (e.g., 2:1, 18), children whose sins are forgiven (2:12), children of God (3:1-2), and fathers (2:13-14). John also

includes himself with the readers in their common Christian experience (“we” in 3:1, 2; 5:14, 19, 20). The readers also had the anointing from God (2:20, 27). They already had a relationship with God because they had believed in the Son of God (5:13). Even in the statement of some of the tests, the saved state of the readers is indicated by the use of the Christian designation “his brother” (e.g., 2:9; 3:10, 14, 15).

A theological concern

If John was making his readers’ conduct the test of their salvation, then there is an unavoidable theological problem in that faith alone in Christ alone would not be the condition for salvation. It would instead be faith in Christ plus confirmatory good conduct. This of course compromises the gospel of God’s free grace clearly taught in the Scriptures (Rom. 3:21-25, Eph. 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). Salvation is either by grace through faith or it is by works, not by any mix of the two (Rom. 4:4-5; 11:6; 1 John 5:1)

Salvation conditioned on tests of conduct destroys the possibility of one’s assurance of salvation. When we look at the tests, we recognize that none of us keeps them all, or keeps any of them perfectly. As long as that is true, then doubts will remain about whether we are saved or not.

Doubts in any relationship are incompatible with deeper intimacy in that relationship. For example, intimacy in marriage is built on the security of unconditional love and acceptance which encourages each spouse to open up to know the other and to be known. If John were posing reasons to doubt one’s salvation, he would be defeating his purpose stated in 1:3-4 to enhance deeper fellowship with the apostles and with God.

References to intimacy

When one recognizes John’s purpose for writing, there is a rich reward. The epistle leads believers into a deeper more intimate knowledge of God. The terms which some regard as references to salvation (“in the light/in darkness, knows God/does not know God, of God/of the devil, abides in God/abides in death”) should better be seen as references to a source or an orientation rather than an absolute state. It describes believers experientially rather than positionally. The tests let the readers know whether they are growing toward God in intimacy or heading away from Him. A more detailed explanation of these references must await a future study.

Conclusion

The tests of 1 John address a believer’s experience. If properly understood, they lead the readers into a more intimate relationship with God Who is already known through their faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. The book’s purpose is not to establish their relationship with God, but to deepen the relationship that they already have. Taken in this way, 1 John does not lead believers into insecurity about their relationship to God, but enhances their desire to be more intimate with Him.