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# An Outline of the First Epistle of John

By MARTIN J. HASZ

The chief isagogical problem of the Epistle is its structure. Dr. R. C. H. Lenski states: "A curious circumstance about the letter is the fact that it seems to have no divisions. Commentators divide it in one way or in another, and state their reasons for such a division; but when one reads the letter, the proposed divisions do not satisfy. They are upset by the series of repetitions and reiterations that occur throughout the letter. That fact makes some interpreters complain about the lack of logic; but this letter has no formal parts, such as we commonly use and expect. It is constructed according to a different and a higher method. . . . John rises above formal divisions and parts. This letter is built like an inverted pyramid or cone. First the basic apex is laid down in 1:1-4; then the upward broadening begins. Starting with 1:5-10 the base rises and expands, and so continues in ever widening circles, as one pertinent thought joins the preceding. Here one block is not laid beside the other, so that joints are made. There are really no joints, not even where the new thoughts are first introduced. The line of thought simply spirals in rising widening circles until all is complete. Keeping from idols (5:21) is only the brief, final touch. This is an unusual structure in writing, but for that very reason it is entirely superior to the common type."<sup>1</sup>

Before we give up the attempt to discover an ordinary form of structure in this Epistle, let us try again. However, we do not chide Dr. Lenski for his low opinion of former attempts nor for his own suggestion. An investigation of various commentaries and books on isagogics reveals a remarkable diversity of opinion as to the structure of First John. Most of them indeed recognize that John states the theme and purpose of the Letter in 1:1-4, especially v. 3, "That ye might have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ," with its resultant fullness of joy, yet they unanimously fail to carry out this theme in the parts which they suggest.

<sup>1</sup> *Interpretation of Peter, John, Jude*, 1938, p. 373 f.

Cartledge is another kind of offender when he writes: "John writes in a most informal way, seemingly following no logical plan. Any analysis of the contents will be satisfactory, but the following is suggested: . . .,"<sup>2</sup> and then places 4:7-12 before 4:1-6 in his outline. To the irreverent the Letter may indeed appear as the repetitious babblings of an old man, but the Epistle certainly deserves a better fate than it has received at the hands of the believing scholars. Even Matthaeus Flacius (Illyricus), described by the *Concordia Cyclopaedia* (*sub nom.*) as "the brilliant, keen, thorough, logical, exegetical defender of Lutheranism," thought that this Letter consisted of only loosely connected aphorisms.<sup>3</sup> Thiessen's 12 parts are not much of an improvement on that.<sup>4</sup> Luecke is somewhat better, with only eight chief parts.<sup>5</sup> Braune, on the other hand, oversimplifies by giving only two chief parts (I. God is Light, II. He that is born of the righteous God does righteousness).<sup>6</sup> Bengel tried hard to base his divisions on the spurious "Comma Johanneum."<sup>7</sup>

But let us not despair because of these previous failures. The Letter may well be likened to a complicated musical fugue into which various themes are woven, which recur again and again. These repetitions emphasize the importance of Christian knowledge, Christian love, and Christian faith in all the aspects of a Christian's life, especially in respect to his continuance in fellowship with the Apostles, with the Christian Church, and thus with Christ and the Father. This Letter has a timeless timeliness, which makes it very applicable to our day also, with its worldliness and unionistic indifference to pure doctrine. The Epistle is solid meat (like Al Capp's "shmoo"; perhaps that is why the commentators have had such a hard time in finding its skeleton). The following outline is presented not as the final solution of a problem that has baffled centuries of Christian scholarship, but as an incentive for other Bible students to try their skill at determining the structure of this important and instructive Epistle.

<sup>2</sup> *A Conservative Intr. to the N. T.*, 1938, p. 168.

<sup>3</sup> Huther in Meyer's *Kommentar*, XIV, 3. Aufl., 1868., p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> *Intr. to the N. T.*, 1944, p. 310.

<sup>5</sup> *Kommentar*, 3. Aufl., 1856, par. 4.

<sup>6</sup> In Lange's *Theol.-Homil. Bibelwerk*, 1865, XV.

<sup>7</sup> In Meyer's *Kommentar*, *loc. cit.*

## OUTLINE OF 1 JOHN

*Prologue: Theme and Purpose, "That ye might have fellowship with us." 1:1-4*

### I. JOHN WARNS OF THINGS THAT DISRUPT THIS FELLOWSHIP. 1:5-2:28

A. Unchristian life (polemic against Nicolaitans). 1:5-2:17.

1. Hypocrisy of nominal Christians who walk in darkness. The real Christian confesses his sins, seeks forgiveness, and abides by God's commandments. 1:5-2:2.

2. Antinomian attitudes reveal ignorance of God rather than the superior "Gnosis" that they boast about. 2:3-7.

3. Hatred toward the brother is another proof that they have no fellowship with God, but walk in darkness. 2:8-14.

4. Love of the world will crowd out love for God and fellowship with Him, such as Christians have. 2:15-17.

B. Antichristian teaching (polemic against Cerinthus). 2:18-28.

1. It excludes them from God's fellowship. 2:18-23.

2. But Christians will remain faithful to the Word, which they have received by the ministration of the Spirit. 2:24-28.

### II. WHAT THIS FELLOWSHIP MEANS TO THE CHRISTIANS. 2:29-3:22

A. They already are God's children, with more blessings to come. 2:29-3:2.

B. A life of sanctification conformable to this divine sonship. 3:3-10.

C. Love for one another, not in word only, but in deed and in truth. 3:11-18.

D. Assurance of forgiveness in answer to their prayer. 3:19-22.

### III. HOW THIS FELLOWSHIP IS DEMONSTRATED. 3:23-5:1

A. By faith in His Son Jesus Christ. 3:23-24.

B. By the orthodoxy of this faith. 4:1-6.

C. By love for the brethren. 4:7-12.

D. By confessing our faith at the Spirit's prompting. 4:13-16.

E. By true love for God (confidence, love for man). 4:17-5:1.

### IV. THE PROOF OF THIS FELLOWSHIP. 5:2-12

A. The subjective proof. 5:2-5.

1. Our keeping of the commandment of love.

2. The orthodoxy of our faith.

**B. The objective proof. 5:6-12. The witness of the Spirit.**

1. Through the birth and death of Christ.
2. Through the Spirit's record—the Word.

**V. THE BLESSED RESULTS OF THIS FELLOWSHIP. 5:13-21**

- A. The assurance of eternal life. 5:13.
- B. Confidence that He hears our prayers. 5:14-15.
- C. Forgiveness of our sins. 5:16-17.
- D. Protection from all evil. 5:18-19.
- E. Saving knowledge of God. 5:20-21.

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**Luther's Later Attitude Toward the Jews**

(Addendum to p. 214 of current volume)

Inadvertently the last one of the conclusions of the author was omitted. With apologies to him we print it here.

"11. The Modern mind which subscribes to the relativity of truth and belittles the 'dogmatism' of Christianity will have little sympathy with the inflexible insistence of Luther that the only answer to the Jewish problem is the conversion of the Jews. At worst the devotees of what is modern will have to assign him a place among medieval bigots. At best they will have to regret his pronouncements on the Jew. The Lutheran Christian who still adheres to a Biblical faith may find the strong language and stringent program of Luther objectionable, but will have to agree that Luther's experiences with the Jews parallel in many ways those of the Apostle Paul, and that after 1900 years there is still no bridge between our present Jewry and Christendom." A.