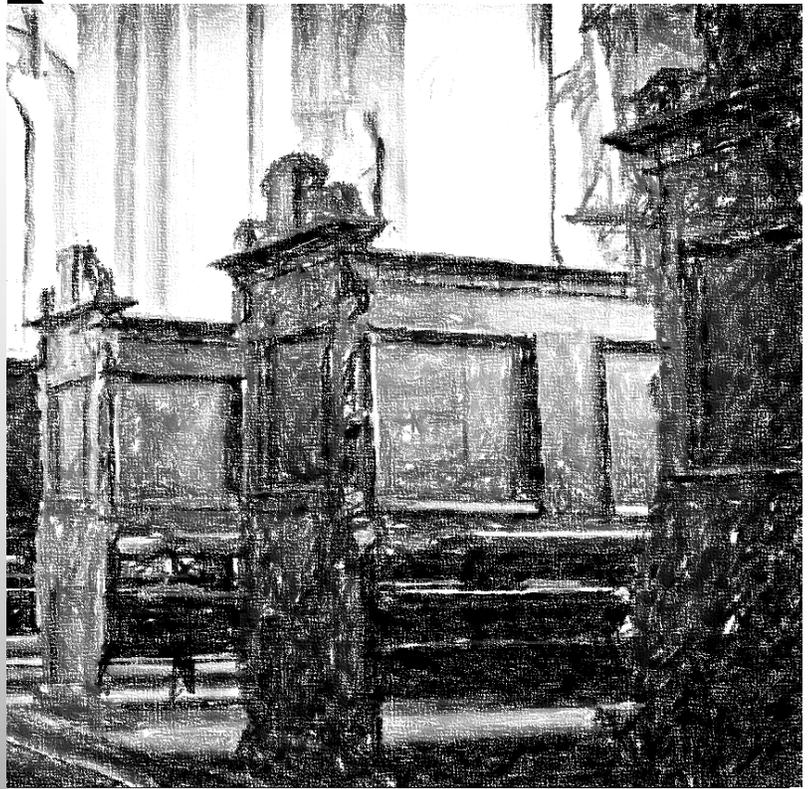




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# The Epistle of First John

Responding to Threats Against The Church's One Foundation

## **Introduction:**

It is often naïvely taught that the early church had it all together. In other words, we are often given the impression that the early Christians had tidy and neat little churches. However, this could not be further from the truth. The early church was messy, especially the church that John wrote to in 1 John. To state it bluntly, the church that John wrote to was a theological nightmare – it was a doctrinal disaster. You see, the Christians that John wrote to were confronted by an early form of what is called “Gnosticism” (more on that later). It is important not to roll your eyes at this term, thinking that it is an irrelevant ancient heresy, for it is not. Gnosticism is everywhere right now in America. It has attacked the theology of the American church and is especially prevalent in modern Christian music, with Christians not even realizing it. And so, as we study 1 John, we are not only going to learn from the Apostle John speaking to an ancient church, but we are going to learn from John speaking to us right now, for there is no such thing as a new heresy. Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun – everything repeats itself but with new packaging.

**Date Written:** 85-95 A.D.

**Words:** 2,141 Words

**Author:** The Apostle John

**Recipients:** Christians in an unknown location. Perhaps Asia Minor.

**Other Notes:**

Epistles are Letters, not sermons. 1 John – General Letter; 2 John – Cover Letter; 3 John – a Personal Letter.

**How to Read 1 John:**

In America, we are very linear in our thinking and writing. We start at the beginning, we go to the middle, and we finish at the end. However, we must understand that this is a Greek way of thinking. John comes out of an Eastern/Jewish culture where they did not think or write linear. Instead, John writes in a circle. Think of a tornado, John addresses specific subjects at the bottom, and as he circles around higher and higher, he expands on those subjects to greater degrees. Eastern thought seems to repeat itself, but it actually builds upon previous thought. This way of writing and thinking is not necessarily wrong but just different for us as Western thinkers.

## What is Gnosticism?

To talk about Gnosticism, we must speak of *Plato*.

So, let's have a quick lesson on the teachings of Plato, an ancient philosopher. In Platonic thought, there are two categories. In the first category, there is the true essence – the perfect and ideal spiritual form of something. Then in the other category, there is the visible material copy of the spiritual form in the here and now. Take a baseball bat, for example. In Platonic philosophy, there is a perfect bat that exists in a spiritual and eternal perfect world (i.e., the good form), and all the bats that we have in our possession are merely imperfect material copies of the perfect spiritual bat.

This all may seem somewhat ridiculous, but we are impacted by Platonic thought. For example, one of the main ways that our western thought is impacted by Platonism is that we see the true and good form as wonderful and everything else in the here and now as imperfect copies. Thus, we can fall into the wrong thinking that spiritual things are good, whereas material things are bad. Regarding Plato, he taught that it was the goal of us as humans to escape our evil material bodies. Material is bad, for it is only an imperfect copy. Therefore, we not only regard material as bad and spiritual as good, but we also end up categorizing things according to these two categories.

Let's show how we think, according to Plato, without even realizing it. Arrange the following words into two categories.

Soul - Body - God - Earth - Frog - Heaven - Rock

Chances are you did something like this! Group #1: God, Soul, Heaven; and Group #2: Earth, Rock, Body, Frog.

If you organized the words into the groups above, you just organized them according to Platonic thought. Notice that you put spiritual things in group #1 and material things in group #2?

When we look at these same words above and arrange them according to the Bible, we see something drastically different.

Group #1: God; Group #2: Soul, Heaven, Earth, Rock, Body, Frog.

So, what does this have to do with Gnosticism? Simply stated, Gnosticism spins off of Plato to say that the material world is bad. Therefore, if the material world is bad, then Jesus could not have taken on human flesh. The whole idea of the Son of God (who was in heaven before his birth via Mary) couldn't possibly become a material human being, for human flesh was just too evil! And so, Gnosticism teaches that it is the goal of mankind to escape their evil material bodies (shells that can be tossed away). This happens as Christians learn about secret knowledge needed for their good soul to escape their evil body.

Bodies and the material world matter to the Lord, though. Jesus put on flesh, and He rose again – with a body. When we die, our soul separates from our bodies, but they will someday be reunited with our bodies. All this is good! The material world is tainted by sin, like our soul. However, both body and soul are important to God. This is going to be continually addressed in 1 John.

