

THE EPISTLES OF JOHN & JUDE
LESSON 1—NOTES
1-2-3 JOHN
INTRODUCTION TO THE JOHNNINE EPISTLES

INTRODUCTION

“The Epistles of John are perfumed with love. The word is continually occurring while the Spirit enters into every sentence. Each letter is thoroughly soaked and impregnated with this heavenly honey...From the opening to the conclusion, love is the manner, love the matter, love the motive and love the aim.” - Charles Spurgeon

After Christ’s ascension, the apostles planted the seed of the gospel in Asia Minor. By the grace of God it grew and many churches began to sprout up. However, shortly after those churches began to grow, false teachers infiltrated them, seeking to sever the bond and connection with the apostles. This infiltration of false teaching strove to demolish the root of apostolic teaching and authority. This led many people within the church to question the content of their faith and its connection with the apostles.

Responding to this by confronting error with truth and entrusting the message of the gospel to the coming generations, John, the last surviving apostle pens the Epistles of John. Writing these epistles fifty to sixty years after Christ’s resurrection, John reveals to the churches in and around the city of Ephesus (those churches then under his apostolic oversight) the vital ingredients of “the Word of Life” (1 John 1:1).

Marked by absolutes, contrasts and certainties, John with such love and zeal for the truth gives us four reasons as to why he has written these epistles.

- First, in order that our *joy may be made complete* (1:4).
- Second, that we *may not sin* (2:1).
- Third, that we would be aware of those *who are trying to deceive us* (2:26).
- Fourth, that we *know that we have eternal life* (5:13).

AUTHOR

The author, in the introductory words of 1 John (v.1-4) professes to have been an eyewitness to the events of Christ’s life. This alone narrows the field of potential authors. It means that the writer had to have been one of the very few who had been closely acquainted with Jesus during His earthly life and was still alive many years later when 1 John was written.

Even though John’s epistles do not identify him by name, from the first century the original and consistent testimony of the church (including Polycarp, Eusebius and Irenaeus) credits it to John

the disciple and apostle. The internal evidence as well, strongly supports the testimony of the early church that John wrote these epistles. Just as John does not name himself in the Gospel of John he also does not name himself in the epistles.

The study of 1 John shows that it displays remarkable similarities to the Gospel of John. Grammatical styles are very similar, the same theological themes run through both books, and both books have many words and phrases in common (some that are not found anywhere else in the NT).

John Stott writes;

Even a superficial reading of the Gospel and the first letter reveals a striking similarity between the two in both subject-matter and syntax. The general subjects treated are much the same. It has often been pointed out that the author of each has the same love of opposites set in stark contrast to one another—light and darkness, life and death, love and hate, truth and falsehood—while people are said to belong to one or other of two categories, with no third alternative. They are children of God or children of the devil; they belong to the world or do not belong to the world. They have life or do not have life. They know God or do not know him... When we compare the occurrence of precise phrases in both Gospel and first letter, we find that in fact the same divine purpose or scheme of salvation is set forth in almost identical terms.

Since scholars believe that the same author wrote both the Gospel of John and 1 John, then the evidence that the apostle John wrote the gospel is also evidence that he wrote the epistles. John MacArthur summarizes five facts of evidence that clearly point to the apostle John as the author.

- *First, the author of the gospel was a Jew, as his familiarity with Jewish customs and beliefs indicates.*
- *Second, he had lived in Palestine, as evidenced by his detailed knowledge of that region.*
- *Third, the author had to have been an eyewitness to many of the events he recorded, since he gave numerous details only an eyewitness would have known.*
- *Fourth, the author was an apostle. He was intimately acquainted with what the Twelve were thinking and feeling.*
- *Finally, the author was the apostle John, since his name does not appear in the fourth gospel. No other writer could possibly have failed to mention such a prominent apostle.*

The close similarities of structure and style in 2 & 3 John compared to 1 John make it apparent that they were also written by John the apostle. However, the author begins the second and third letters by announcing himself as “*the elder*” (2 Jn.1; 3 Jn. 1). The words, “the elder” makes known the authority, status (he knew Jesus personally) and advanced age of the apostle.

JOHN—THE APOSTLE OF LOVE

It is believed that John was born at the northern tip of the Sea of Galilee in Bethsaida. This was the hometown of Philip, Andrew, and Peter (John 1:44).

John's mother, Salome (Mark 15:40, Matt. 27:56), contributed financially to Jesus' ministry (Matt. 27:55-56), and is thought to have been the sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus (John 19:25). This would make John, James and Jesus cousins.

John was the younger of the two sons of Zebedee (James is almost always listed first).

John was a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee who owned his own boat and had hired servants (Mark 1:20).

John was a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35-40). When John the Baptist pointed out Jesus as the Messiah, John immediately left him and followed Jesus (John 1:37). After staying with Him for a while, John returned to his father's fishing business. Later, he became a permanent disciple of Jesus (Matt. 4:18-22) and was named an apostle (Matt. 10:2).

John and James, were known as "the sons of Zebedee" (signifying that Zebedee was a man of some importance). Zebedee's entire family had enough status that John "was known to the high priest." This is how John was able to get Peter admitted to the high priest's courtyard on the night of Jesus' arrest (John 18:15-16).

John was known to have a fiery temperament. He was bold, direct and outgoing. Jesus gave John and James the name "Boanerges" which means "Sons of Thunder" (Mark 3:17). Both brothers lived up to that name, characterized by zeal, passion and ambition.

John and James were filled with outrage, and eager to call down fire from heaven against the Samaritans (Luke 9:54). John was one of those who debated which one of the disciples was the greatest (Mark 9:34). He rebuked a man who was ministering in the name of Jesus, because the man was not part of the disciples group (Mark 9:38). Together John and James approached Jesus with their request to be seated on His right and left hand in the kingdom (Mark 10:37).

Along with James and Peter, John was part of the inner circle of the Twelve (Matt. 17:1; Mark 5:37; 13:3; 14:33).

By the time of the crucifixion, Jesus had enough trust and confidence in John to give the care of His mother over to him. From that day on, John cared for Mary as if she were his own mother (John 19:25-27). Church history reports that John never left Jerusalem and never left caring for Mary, until her death.

John witnessed Jesus' conversation with Moses and Elijah on the mount of the transfiguration (Matthew 17:1-9).

After the Ascension, his importance in the twelve grew as he matured and became one of the leaders (a "pillar") of the Jerusalem church (Acts 1:13; 3:1-11; 4:13-21; 8:14; Gal. 2:9).

He ministered with Peter (Acts 3:1; 4:13; 8:14) until he went to Ephesus (tradition says before the destruction of Jerusalem), from where he wrote the gospel and the three epistles of John.

According to tradition, John spent the last decades of his life at Ephesus, overseeing the churches in the surrounding area. Toward the end of his life (according to Irenaeus), John lived until the time of the emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117) and was banished to the island of Patmos. It was there that he received and wrote the visions described in the book of Revelation. Later, tradition holds that he returned to Ephesus and was buried there, being the only apostle to die of old age.

Though he mellowed over time John never lost his passion for the truth. Two vignettes from his years at Ephesus reveal that, according to Polycarp, “John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving (the heretic) Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, *“Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within”* (Irenaeus, Against Heresies, 3.3.4). Clement of Alexandria relates how John fearlessly entered the camp of a band of robbers and led its captain, who had once professed faith in Christ, to true repentance. (MacArthur)

Although he was greatly advanced in age when he wrote the epistles, John was still actively ministering to churches. He was the sole remaining apostolic survivor who had firsthand, eyewitness association with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. It has been recorded that he was so frail in his last days at Ephesus that he had to be carried into the church, and the phrase that was constantly on his lips was; *“My little children, love one another.”*

One church Father (Papias) who had direct contact with John described him as a *“living and abiding voice.”*

John is also called the “apostle of love.” In his own gospel, he refers to himself as “the one whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23, 20:2, 21:7, 21:20). He is depicted as the one leaning against Jesus’ breast at the last supper. Only through the transforming work of Jesus Christ can John the “Boanerges,” (Son of Thunder) be known as the Apostle of Love.

John MacArthur writes;

John did eventually learn the balance between ambition and humility. In fact, humility is one of the great virtues that comes through in his writings. Throughout John’s Gospel, for instance, he never once mentions his own name. (The only “John” who is mentioned by name in the Gospel of John is John the Baptist.) The apostle John refuses to speak of himself in reference to himself. Instead, he speaks of himself in reference to Jesus. He never paints himself in the foreground as a hero, but uses every reference to himself to honor Christ. Rather than write his name, which might focus attention on him, he refers to himself as “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23; 20:2; 21:7), giving glory to Jesus for having loved such a man. In fact, he seems utterly in awe of the marvel that Christ loved him. Of course, according to John 13:1-2, Jesus loved all His

apostles to perfection. But it seems there was a unique way in which John gripped this reality, and he was humbled by it. ...John was a man who had been transformed literally into one that church history calls the apostle of love.

LOCATION AND DATE

Although 1 John does not contain clear historical indications of when or where it was written, it is believed to have been composed by John in the latter part of the first century at Ephesus. This is indicated by the type of heretical teaching against which the recipients are put on guard, and is confirmed by the evidence that the Epistle was known early in the second century.

The church fathers (Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, Eusebius) place the apostle John at Ephesus during the time 1 John was written. Polycarp and Papias cite 1 John in their writings.

“This suggests a date of composition no later than the 90s AD. This dovetails with the testimony of church fathers that, shortly before AD 67, John joined other Christians in departing from Jerusalem prior to the destruction of the city by Rome. John reportedly resumed his apostolic ministry in the vicinity of the great but highly idolatrous city of Ephesus (in modern western Turkey), He likely wrote 1 John as an elder statesman of the faith in the last third of the first century, perhaps to churches in the surrounding region. This might have included towns like those mentioned alongside Ephesus in the opening chapters of Revelation: Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea (Rev. 2:8-3:33)” (ESV Bible 2661).

As well, 2 & 3 John were most likely written at Ephesus at about the same time or shortly after 1 John.

It is estimated that 80 percent of the verses in 1 John reflect concepts found in the gospel of John (Burdick, The Letters of John) and since John wrote his Gospel about 80-90 AD, it would be feasible to set a date of 90-95 AD for the composition of the epistles of John.

Approximate Dates:

Gospel of John—A.D. 80-90

1 John—A.D. 90-95

2 John—A.D. 90-95

3 John—A.D. 90-95

Revelation—A.D. 94-96

RECIPIENTS

1 John

John does not specify the identity of the people in which he is addressing. However, in form and content it is a message of encouragement and reassurance, sent to a group of Christian

believers, primarily Gentiles (due to the absence of OT quotes and references apart from 3:12, 5:21), who were perplexed and bewildered by recent events in their surroundings. It cannot be determined whether it was sent to a single church or to several churches in the area; however, what is reasonably certain is that the recipients lived in some district of the province of Asia.

2 John

John calls his recipients “*the elect lady and her children.*” Many scholars interpret this statement metaphorically, believing that John is referring to a local church as “the elect lady” and its members as “her children.” However, others believe that this should be translated literally and that the elect lady most likely would have been an actual Christian woman and her children, who John personally knew. Thankfully, whether John is writing to the church as a household of faith, or to one individual household, his teaching applies equally.

3 John

John calls the recipient “*the beloved Gaius.*” Gaius was a fairly common name at the time. At least four different men have that name in the NT (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Rom. 16:23; 1Cor. 1:14). However through the words of John, we know more about this Gaius than any of the others. He walked faithfully in the truth of Christ and was a selfless servant whose faith was evidenced by his actions. He was a beloved friend of the apostle (v.1-6).

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Beginning in the eighth century B.C., Ancient Rome grew from a small town on central Italy’s Tiber River into an empire that at its peak encompassed most of continental Europe, Britain, much of western Asia, northern Africa and the Mediterranean Islands. The Roman province of Asia occupied approximately the western third of the peninsula which we call Asia Minor.

F.F. Bruce explains:

The Romans gave it the name of Asia because it was the first territory on the continent of Asia to come under the direct control of the Roman state. For a century and a half before its incorporation in the Roman Empire, this territory had constituted the kingdom of Pergamum, whose rulers were friends and allies of Rome. When the last king of Pergamum died, in 133 BC, he bequeathed his realm to the roman senate and people, and after deliberation they decided to accept the bequest. After reorganization as a Roman province, it was governed by a senior ex-magistrate called a proconsul, who was appointed by the senate, normally for one year. The province is therefore referred to sometimes as “proconsular Asia.” To begin with, the proconsul’s seat of government was at Pergamum, the capital of the former kingdom, but later it was moved to Ephesus, and there it remained throughout New Testament times. Asia was regarded as the wealthiest of the Roman provinces; its cities had been centers of Greek culture for many centuries.

Christianity may have been introduced to the province of Asia by individuals before the middle of the first century AD, but it was effectively established in the province during Paul's Ephesian ministry, to be dated probably from the late summer of AD 52 to the spring of 55. So thoroughly did Paul and his colleagues prosecute (to carry through to completion) the work of evangelization during those years that not only the people of Ephesus but "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). The seven churches of Revelation, and other churches besides were founded at that time, and the continuous history of Christianity in that territory can be traced from then until the Greco-Turkish exchange of populations in 1923.

CURRENT SETTING AT THE TIME OF THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

The world where the apostle John lived at the close of the first century A.D. was in a state of complete disorder. This disorder was apparent culturally, philosophically and religiously. Ephesus, where the apostle John lived, was the intellectual center of all this turmoil.

Religious Syncretism (a fusion of pagan beliefs with Christian ones) and Inclusivism (that many different sets of beliefs are true; in contrast to exclusivism, which asserts that only one way is true and all others are in error) were the beliefs of the time. *"Apart from the Judeo-Christian sphere, the world was religiously inclusivistic. There was always room for a new religion, provided of course that it was not of an exclusive nature. Syncretism, however, did not merely express itself in a mood of tolerance toward other faiths. Its characteristic expression was in the combination of various ideas and beliefs from different sources to form new or aberrant religions. This was the age of the developing mystery religions, the age of the occult, the age of the proliferation of Gnostic sects"* (Donald Burdick 4, MacArthur Commentary).

John MacArthur adds to this thought when he states;

Nowhere was that more evident than in the Roman province of Asia, located in western Asia Minor, in modern Turkey. The region forms a land bridge between the continents of Europe and Asia, across which flowed the tides of invasion and migration. As a result, it was a melting pot of ideas, philosophies, and religions. The Imperial cult of emperor worship was widespread. The region was also home to the worship of a myriad of false gods. In the midst of the darkness of paganism and superstition, the Christian church was a beacon of hope, shining forth the light of truth (Matt. 5:14; Phil. 2:15).

But the church in Asia did not exist in isolation from the surrounding culture. The plethora of competing ideologies inevitably posed a threat—both externally, from false religions, and internally, from false teachers (Acts 20:29; Matt. 7:15) and their followers (2 Cor. 11:26; Gal. 2:4) infiltrating the churches. The pressure had already begun to take its toll on the churches of Asia. Some had split, with the false teachers and their followers leaving (1 John 2:19). Only two of the seven churches in the region addressed in Revelation 2-3 were commended by the Lord (Smyrna and Philadelphia); the other five were rebuked for worldliness and tolerating false doctrine (Ephesus, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, and Laodicea). It was in this strategic location, where the battle against "the world forces of this darkness ... the spiritual forces of wickedness

in the heavenly places” (Eph. 6:12) raged most fiercely, that John, the last living apostle, ministered.

In Acts 20 the Apostle Paul warns his readers of false teachers arising from within the church and permeating it with philosophical ideas and trends. This is exactly what began to happen. The church was infected with false doctrine and perverted fundamental teaching. These false teachers advocated and pushed new ideas which eventually became known as “Gnosticism.”

Formed from the Greek word for knowledge (*gnosis*), this term points to the Gnostic claim to have vital knowledge that common Christians lacked. Gnosticism was the liberalism, modernism, and New-Age syncretism of the apostolic era. It is a broad term embracing various pagan, Jewish and semi-Christian systems, which did not come to full development until the second century. Like all heresies, Gnosticism assaulted the Gospel, the person of Jesus Christ and His work.

The basic belief of this Gnostic thought was that only spirit was good and that matter, the material world, was essentially evil (philosophical dualism). As a result, the Gnostics despised the world since it was matter. *“In particular, they despised the body, which, being matter, was necessarily evil. Imprisoned within this body was the human spirit. That spirit was a seed of God, who was altogether good. So, the aim of life must be to release this heavenly seed imprisoned in the evil of the body”* (Barclay). Their main goal in life was to set free the human spirit from the wicked prison house of the body.

Gnosticism also claimed an elevated knowledge known only to those that had a mystical knowledge of truth and was especially attractive to people of some intellectual attainment. It was not intended for the normal believer, but for an elite of spiritual recruits. They believe that salvation comes through experiential knowledge—a secret knowledge that teaches one how to escape the evil of a physical world. *“They claimed that the way to salvation was through secret enlightenment. Only the initiated, who knew their secret theories, were in the light. This exclusive mentality led them to despise unenlightened outsiders. It produced an arrogant lack of love”* (Cole).

J.I. Packer defines Gnosticism in this way;

Like its present-day counterparts, it actually sought to destroy Christianity by attempting to update and reshape it in light of the supposed certainties of secular learning. It started from the conviction that the material order, including the human body, is worthless, contemptible, and indeed evil, and that mankind’s basic religious problem is not, as Jews and Christians thought, moral (our sin, producing guilt before God), but physical (imprisonment in our bodies, producing isolation from God). Accordingly, it viewed the teaching—doctrinal, ethical and devotional—that the apostles gave in their evangelistic and pastoral ministries as crude and misconceived. It rejected the Incarnation and Atonement, reimagined Jesus as an inspired teacher of secret knowledge about spiritual powers, ascetic routines, and mystical moments, and called on believers to qualify as God’s elite by embracing this revised version of their faith.

Proud, self-satisfied, and sure they were right, the Gnostics disrupted churches, to the point of walking out on those who held fast to the apostolic message.

Gnosticism denied that Jesus had come in the flesh. They rejected the doctrine of incarnation, and thus, the doctrine of atonement.

John MacArthur explains:

Instead of divine revelation standing as judge over man's ideas, man's ideas judged God's revelation (2:15–17). That philosophical dualism led the false teachers whom John confronted to accept some form of Christ's deity, but to deny His humanity. He could not, according to them, have taken on a physical body, since matter was evil. The denial of the Incarnation in Gnosticism took two basic forms. Some, known as Docetists (from the Greek verb dokeō "to seem," or "to appear"), taught that Jesus' body was not a real, physical body, but only appeared to be so. In sharp contrast, John forcefully asserted that he had "heard," "seen," and "touched" Jesus Christ (1:1), who had truly "come in the flesh"(4:2). Others (such as the heretic Cerinthus, whose presence caused John to flee the bathhouse) taught that the Christ spirit descended on the man Jesus at His baptism, but left Him before the crucifixion. John refuted that specious argument by asserting that the Jesus who was baptized was the same person who was crucified. Either of those heretical views undermines not only the biblical teaching of Jesus' true humanity, but also of the atonement. If Jesus were not truly man—as well as truly God—when He suffered and died, He could not have been an acceptable substitutionary sacrifice for sin.

The Gnostics' philosophical dualism also caused them to be indifferent to moral values and ethical behavior. To them, the body was merely the prison in which the spirit was incarcerated. The gnostic idea that matter was evil and only spirit was good led to the idea that either the body should be treated harshly, a form of asceticism (Col. 2:21-23), or sin committed in the body had no connection to or effect on one's spirit. This led some, especially John's opponents, to conclude that sin committed in the physical body did not matter; absolute indulgence in immorality was permissible; one could deny sin even existed (1:8–10) and disregard God's law (3:4).

Gnosticism is considered to be any "high thinking" in which man elevates himself above the Word of God. It is described in 2 Cor. 10:5 as; *"Every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of God."* The purpose of cultivating and spreading Gnosticism was to deceive the Christians on important matters of doctrine and truth.

John states, *"These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you"* (2:26). These heretics had at one time been in the church, but they had left to form their own churches, based on their professed "enlightened" view of things. Most likely they had taken other church members with them and were actively recruiting from those who had not yet left.

PURPOSE

1 John

It is widely understood that 1 John was written as a response to the rise of Gnosticism that had plagued the church. It is directed to an urgent situation in the churches, where false prophets have separated themselves and their followers from the main body of believers (2:19) and therefore divided the church.

John, responding to the serious crisis threatening the churches sent the first letter of John to attack and disprove these false teachers. He exposes and refutes their doctrinal and ethical errors while reassuring the genuine believers of the truth that they possess eternal life.

F.F. Bruce writes;

The Christians who remained in their former fellowship were hard hit and shaken by the secession of these others, and needed to be reassured. The others were so confident that they were right; they talked in such superior terms of their special initiation into the true knowledge that humbler believers might well wonder whether their foundation was so secure as they had thought. Where did the truth lie? Where was eternal life to be found? In their old fellowship, or with the seceders? The seceders probably said, "We've got it; you haven't!" How could it be known which side was right? What were the criteria?

To Christians in this perplexity, then, the First Epistle of John was written. The writer was in the best possible position to state the criteria of truth and life, and to help his readers to see that they, and not the seceders, satisfied these criteria. "I write this," he says, "to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 John 5:13).

2 & 3 John

The immediate problem John is addressing in both 2 and 3 John is of false teachers that were circulating among the churches. Having left the fellowship of believers these heretics were conducting a traveling ministry among John's congregations, looking to make converts, and taking advantage of Christian hospitality to advance their cause. They were generally received into the church and given hospitality in various homes. The question to be asked was, "What if the teacher claimed to be a Christian, but taught false doctrine?" Should he be received or not?

Second John warns against receiving and encouraging such false teachers, while Third John encourages genuine hospitality towards true teachers.

John Stott writes;

It is against this background that we must read the second and third letters of John, for in them "the elder" issues instructions concerning whom to welcome and whom to refuse, and why.

Genuine Christian missionaries, he writes, may be recognized both by the message they bring and by the motive which inspires them. If they faithfully proclaim the doctrine of Christ (2 John 7), and if they have set out not for gain but for the sake of the Name (3 John 7), then they should be both received and helped forward on their journey “in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 6).

Third John is the most personal of the three Johannine epistles. Like 2 John, it addresses the issue of the believers duty to show love and hospitality within the parameters of truth and faithfulness. *“Second John revealed the negative side: false teachers are not to be granted hospitality in the name of showing love. Third John expresses the positive counterpart to that principle: all who embrace the truth are to be loved and cared for” (MacArthur).*

John Stott continues;

A similar problem lies behind both letters, namely the visits of itinerant teachers and what treatment is to be given to them. Both letters are therefore concerned with Christian truth and love and with their relation to hospitality. There are differences, however. In the second letter “the elder” writes to a local church, personified as “the chosen lady and her children,” whereas in the third letter he addresses by name one of the leading members of a local church, and refers to two others. This mention of Gaius (1), Diotrephes (9) and Demetrius (12) makes the third letter more vivid than the second and gives us a clearer glimpse into the inner life of a first-century church. The message differs also. In the second letter the church is warned not to extend hospitality to false teachers who deny the doctrine of the incarnation, while in the third “the elder” commends Gaius for the hospitality he has shown to teachers of the truth, urges him to continue it, and sharply rebukes Diotrephes for his refusal to welcome them and for his opposition to those who wished to. In this way the positive instruction of the third letter is complementary to the more negative instruction of the second. The two letters must be read together if we are to gain a balanced understanding of the duties and limits of Christian hospitality.

THEOLOGICAL THEMES

The predominant theme of these epistles is Christian certainty. The assurance, knowledge, confidence and boldness believers have in Christ Jesus our Savior. *The characteristic verbs used by John, that confirm this are; ginōskein, “to perceive” (25 times) and eidenai, “to know” (15 times), while a characteristic noun mentioned is parrēsia, “confidence of attitude” or “boldness of speech” (Stott).*

The certainty of the believer is twofold – objective (that the Christian religion is true) and subjective (that they themselves have been born of God and possess eternal life). To be a believer then, is to have been born of God, to know God, to live in him, and to enjoy that intimate, personal communion with him which is eternal life (1 Jn. 5:20; John 17:3).

John urges his readers to examine their spiritual state, by supplying certain “tests” to verify their faith. *“Genuine believers will practice righteousness and love toward fellow believers. John*

was very concerned that Christians know how to tell the true from the false, the genuine from the artificial, true believers from false ones. He presents tests here to help determine these things” (MacArthur).

1 John

John, writing as if he is having a conversation with his beloved children, confronts the false teachers and encourages the believers with the overall theme to get back to the fundamentals and basics of their faith...To remember true doctrine and the security they have in Jesus Christ their Advocate and Righteous Savior in whom they have eternal life.

As their pastor he communicates very essential principles desiring them to regard with joy the certainty and authenticity of their faith, instead of being troubled by the false teaching and desertion of other so called believers. *“First John is not only pastoral but also polemical... designed to arm people to deal with error. But at the same time it is also a teaching letter in that it has immense edification within it” (MacArthur).*

2 John

The overall theme of 2 John closely parallels 1 John’s theme to recall the fundamentals (or basics) of Christianity. John encourages the believers to cling to truth (v. 4), love (v. 5), and obedience (v.6). Not only should Christians hold on to the fundamentals of faith, but John also conveys the theme that the hospitality commanded of them (Rom. 12:13) must be discerning. *“The basis of hospitality must be common love of or interest in the truth, and Christians must share their love within the confines of that truth. Hospitality and kindness must be focused on those who are adhering to the fundamentals of the faith. Otherwise, Christians may actually aid those who are attempting to destroy those basic truths of the faith. Sound doctrine must serve as the test of fellowship and the basis of separation between those who profess to be Christians and those who actually are” (MacArthur Bible).*

3 John

The apostle is concerned about travelling teachers and the attitude of the congregation towards them. Whereas 2 John is primarily a warning against welcoming deceivers, 3 John is a warning against rejecting those who are true fellow Christians and ambassadors of the gospel. It is the positive complement of the negative warnings of 2 John, reminding Gaius and his congregation that the possible abuse of hospitality by the heretics is not to become an excuse for failing to show hospitality to the true and faithful Christian preachers. *“This concerns both the inner life of the local fellowship (4–6) and the doctrinal danger which threatens it from without (7–11). The two are related. John commends the faithful inner nucleus (‘some of your children’) who are ‘walking in the truth’ and begs them to keep God’s other commands, especially that of mutual love. His reason for wanting to see the church thus strengthened in truth and love is that many deceivers have gone out into the world to spread their wicked lies” (Stott).*

INTERPRETIVE CHALLENGES

1 John

1. Regardless of the unanimous testimony of the early church and the strong internal evidence that the apostle John authored this epistle, some critics continue to insist on attributing it to someone else. The usual person cited is a man called John the Elder who supposedly lived in the surrounding area. The existence of this person rests entirely on a much disputed statement attributed by Eusebius to Papias who, like Polycarp, was a disciple of the apostle John.

2. Theologians debate the specific nature of the false teachers' beliefs in 1 John, because John does not directly state their beliefs, but instead combats the heretics mainly through a positive restatement of the fundamentals of the faith. The main feature of the heresy, as noted above, appears to be a denial of the incarnation. As pointed out, this was likely the beginnings of Gnosticism. (MacArthur Bible)

3. The interpreter is challenged by the rigidity of John's theology. John presents the basic fundamentals of the Christian life in absolute, not relative, terms. John's truths are in black and white and through stark contrasts. (MacArthur Bible)

4. John challenges the interpreter by his repetition of similar themes over and over to stress and accentuate the basic truths of genuine Christianity. (MacArthur Bible)

2 John

1. The reference to the "elder" has caused some disagreement. However, many scholars agree that John was so well known to this local church that he didn't need to mention his given name. The terms "elder," "overseer," "pastor," and "shepherd" are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to the church leaders (Acts 20:17; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). John was an apostle, who had authority from Christ over all of the churches. But, he was also a part of a local congregation, where he served as elder. Because of John's age and the fact that he was the last surviving apostle, perhaps the churches called him "the elder." It is a title both of respect and authority.

2. The reference to the "chosen lady and her children" (v. 1) is widely disputed. In studying the original Greek it is not apparent whether she is a specific woman and her offspring, or a local church and its members.

3. Second John stands in direct antithesis to the frequent cry for ecumenism and Christian unity among believers. Love and truth are inseparable in Christianity. Truth must always guide the exercise of love (Eph. 4:15). Love must stand the test of truth. The main lesson of this book is that truth determines the bounds of love, and as a consequence, of unity. Therefore, truth must exist before love can unite, for truth generates love (1 Pet. 1:22). When someone compromises

the truth, true Christian love and unity are destroyed. Only a shallow sentimentalism exists where the truth is not the foundation of unity. (MacArthur Bible)

3 John

Some think that Diotrephes may either have been a heretical teacher or at least favored the false teachers who were condemned by 2 John. However, the epistle gives no clear evidence to warrant such a conclusion, especially since one might expect that John would have mentioned Diotrephes' heretical views. The epistle indicates that his problems centered around arrogance and disobedience, which is a problem for the orthodox as well as the heretic. (MacArthur Bible)

GNOSTICISM TODAY

Isn't the culture of our current world strikingly resemblant of the culture during the period that these Epistles were written? Today, many things are recognizable as Gnosticism. We can see this in the new age movement, mysticism, cults or false religious systems, social justice theories, critical race theories and all other viewpoints, books and teachings elevated above and against, the truth of God.

In his book Fault Lines, Voddie Baucham writes;

"Ethnic Gnosticism" is a term I coined several years ago to explain what I see as a dangerous and growing phenomenon in the culture that is creeping into the church. Gnosticism is derived from the Greek word gnosis (knowledge) and is based on the idea that truth can be accessed through special, mystical knowledge. The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia calls it "a heresy far more subtle and dangerous than any that had appeared during the early years of the church." Ethnic Gnosticism, then is the idea that people have special knowledge based solely on their ethnicity. This is a hallmark of both Critical Race Theory and its predecessor, Critical Theory.

The general theme of the current Critical Social Justice movement within evangelicalism is a covert attack on the sufficiency of Scripture. People are not coming right out and saying that the Bible is not enough. Instead, high-profile pastors get up and speak about the ways in which modern sociology texts have done for them what the revelation of Scripture has been unable to do.

...the CRT crowd in evangelicalism are not men who have been challenged on their interpretation of Scripture—they are proclaiming that sources outside of Scripture have brought them to a new, better and more complete understanding of God's truth on race."

And so, as we familiarize ourselves with Gnosticism and think about the descriptions of Religious Syncretism and Inclusivism in the time of John, we are able to see that these same forms of false teaching are present today. This is what the Epistles of John is speaking to.

Not only was John's teaching apropos then, but it is **vital** now in our world today. May our Lord bless, teach and reveal to us this year His perfect truth and love as we live and walk in Him. PTL!

A FINAL NOTE ON JOHN

John's life serves to remind us of several lessons we can apply to our own lives. Zeal for the truth, love for God and one another, as well as boldness covered in humility and grace.

John MacArthur writes,

To the very end of his life John was still a thunderous defender of the truth. He lost none of his intolerance for lies. In his epistles, written near the end of his life, he was still thundering out against errant Christologies, against anti-Christian deceptions, against sin, and against immorality. He was in that sense a Son of Thunder to the end. I think the Lord knew that the most powerful advocate of love needed to be a man who never compromised the truth.

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