

## THE LETTERS OF JOHN

### THE CERTAINTY AND ASSURANCE OF KNOWING GOD AND ETERNAL LIFE

#### INTRODUCTION

The recipients of these letters were living in a spiritually confusing age. What does a person have to believe in order to be a genuine Christian? Did the teaching of Jesus and the apostles really offer the only one way to God? Were other religions valid if a person believed them sincerely? The plethora of religious views that filled the 1st-century landscape caused a great deal of confusion and apparently left many early Christians feeling uncertain of the truth. They, like we, needed the assurance of life in a culture of death; of certainty in a culture of uncertainty; of truth in a culture of fake news. Into this situation, John declared, "I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life" (1 Jn 5:13). John desired to cut through the spiritual fog so that they might live with the assurance of knowing the truth about Jesus and the eternal life that was theirs in Him.

#### **A. The Letters of John and the New Testament Canon: The "Catholic" Letters**

The early Christians began the New Testament canon with four Gospels, which are biographies about Jesus. The book of Acts follows by telling the story of the expansion of the Jesus' movement from a small, localized, Jewish movement centered in Israel to a multiethnic, international church permeating even the city of Rome. The letters of Paul then follow the book of Acts, which functions as an introduction to Paul's letters. Imagine how lost we would be reading Paul's writings if we did not have Acts to tell us (1) who is this guy Paul? and (2) where did these churches come from? Acts 13-28 reveals Paul's missionary efforts and the spread of churches even to Rome. In fact, Acts concludes with Paul proclaiming the gospel in Rome. The letters of Paul consist of thirteen bearing his name and a fourteenth closely identified with him. The collection begins with nine letters addressed to churches, organized from longest to shortest, and four letters addressed to individuals, also listed from longest to shortest. Hebrews marks the fourteenth letter in Paul's collection. Though Paul almost certainly did not write it, Hebrews has been identified with Paul from the very beginning. In fact, our oldest complete copy of Paul's letters (*P<sup>46</sup>*, a late 2nd century papyrus codex) places Hebrews immediately after Romans. Following Paul's letters, the canon contains a collection of seven letters beginning with James and concluding with Jude. 1-3 John is included in these "Catholic" letters, taken from the Greek *kata holos*, meaning "according to the whole." Unlike Paul's writings, which were addressed to specific audiences, these letters were addressed more universally to Christians everywhere. Notice the canonical balance and perfection. Paul wrote to seven churches, his collection has fourteen letters in total, and there are seven Catholic letters. When you move to the final book of the canon, Revelation, it also opens with seven letters to seven churches.

The Catholic letters open with James, Peter, and John, the three disciples closest to Jesus and the figures Paul designates the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church (Gal 2:9). The authority of these letters is rooted in their status as eyewitnesses of the deeds and teachings of Jesus. In fact, 1 John begins, "That which was from the beginning, which we heard, which we saw with our eyes, which we beheld, and which our hands touched concerning the word of life," (1:1). While Paul's writings focus on faith alone as the basis of salvation, the letters of John and the other Catholic letters focus on practicing obedience and following God's way. As John declares: "The one who claims to abide in him ought to walk just as He walked" (1 Jn 2:6). In this way, the Catholic letters together with Paul's writings present the proper balance between faith and works. David Nienhuis rightly asserts: "the Pauline message teaches us about what it is for us to *have faith* in the risen Lord, and the Catholic letters teach us what the Lord taught us about *living faithfully* (*A Concise Guide to Reading the New Testament*, 138).

## **B. Authorship & Date**

These three letters, like the fourth Gospel are anonymous, that is, they do not identify the author by name within the documents themselves. They have, however, been attributed to John the apostle, son of Zebedee, brother of James, since the mid-second century. Tradition going back as far as Irenaeus (A.D. 130-202) asserts that "John the disciple of the Lord, who leaned back on his breast . . . published the Gospel while he was resident at Ephesus in Asia" (*Against Heresies* 3.1.2). A bit later he adds, "For this reason also he [John] has thus testified to us in his Epistle: 'Little children, it is the last time, and as ye have heard that Antichrist doth come . . .'" (3.16.5). The early-church historian Eusebius (A.D. 265-339) quotes a statement supposedly from Papias (d. 155), bishop of Hierapolis, that "if ever anyone came who had followed the elders, I inquired into the words of the elders, what Andrew or Peter or Philip or Thomas or James or *John* or Matthew, or any other of the Lord's disciples, had said, and what Aristion and the *elder John*, the Lord's disciples, were saying," (*Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4-6). Eusebius interpreted the statement to mean there were two men by the name John, one the Apostle and the other the Elder, who lived later. This led to speculation that John the Apostle wrote the Gospel and 1 John and John the Elder wrote 2 & 3 John. The vast majority of scholars have rejected Eusebius's interpretation of Papias and posit that John the Apostle and John the Elder are one and the same. While we can't speak definitively on the question of authorship, it is without question that the letters claim eyewitness testimony and apostolic authority. Ultimately, these letters are divinely inspired Scripture and the precise identification of author is a secondary matter. The evidence, however, does point persuasively to John the Apostle/Elder as the author. Assuming John authored the letters, they were likely written late in the first century.

## **C. Recipients**

First John is a "general" letter since it has no specific recipient mentioned. It is clear that it is addressed to Christians (2:12-14, 3:1, 5:13). The lack of any personal names in either the opening or closing may indicate that it was intended to circulate in churches throughout Asia Minor (Modern Turkey). Second John is addressed to "the elect lady and her children," likely a way of speaking of the church and its members. Third John is addressed specifically to Gaius.

## **D. Occasion/Purpose**

First John addresses the problems caused by a group within the church who had adopted beliefs calling into question the incarnation, specifically the reality of Jesus' humanity. They rejected that Jesus was the unique and true savior and rejected the substitutionary nature of Jesus' death for the forgiveness of sins. Their theological error caused them to live sinful lives, to secede from the church, and to seek to draw others to their heretical view. While the false teaching resists a one-to-one correspondence with any group we can identify, the beliefs of these troublemakers have connections with emerging Gnosticism. Gnostics, such as Cerinthus and Valentinus, held to a dualism that viewed all matter as evil and spirit as good. A good God must be totally separate from the world of flesh and matter. Thus, God could not have taken upon himself human flesh. He could only appear to be human. John responds that in Jesus the two natures, divine and human, were united in one person, fully God and fully man.

Evidently, John's first letter did not eradicate the heresy or the heretics. Second and 3 John were written to address the lingering effects. Second John cautions against providing hospitality to the false teachers as they pedal their heresy and division. In 3 John, the Elder praises Gaius, probably the pastor, for offering hospitality to the teachers of the truth, likely sent out by the Elder. The Elder also warns Gaius about a man named Diotrephes, who was engaged in a power struggle for control of the church. The Elder intended to pay a short visit to correct the terrible things Diotrephes said and the lies he told (vv. 9-10).

## STRUCTURE & CONTENT

### I JOHN

#### **I. Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-4)**

This section serves as an introduction to the larger work, just as Jn 1:1-14 serves as the introduction to the fourth gospel. There are a number of interesting parallels between the two. In both the identity of Jesus is not immediately revealed (Jn 1:17; 1 Jn 1:3). The delay in the identification builds interest and anticipation. Note the parallel emphasis on the "word" (Jn 1:1,14; 1 Jn 1:1), the "beginning" (Jn 1:1; 1 Jn 1:1), the new life in Christ (Jn 1:4; 1 Jn 1:1-2), and the emphasis on eyewitness testimony (John the Baptist in Jn 1:6-8,15; 1 Jn 1:1-3). For those who would deny that Jesus was truly human, John highlights that the apostles had heard, seen, and touched Jesus "in the flesh."

#### **II. God is Light: Walk in Him (1:5-2:2)**

The fundamental statement of this section is that "God is light and there is no darkness in him at all." The image of light indicates the nature of God's character and essential being with reference to His (1) glory, (2) truth, (3) holiness, and most importantly, (4) revelation, which indicates God's intention to reveal himself to humanity. John highlights three claims by the secessionists. Each claim is marked by "if we say" (ἐάν εἴπωμεν). In each case John refutes the false claim with a counterclaim.

Claim #1: They say they have fellowship with him and yet they walk in darkness (1:6)

-Response: If we walk in the light we have fellowship with one another (1:7)

Claim #2: They say that they have not sinned since believing in Jesus (1:8)

-Response: If we confess our sins he is faithful to forgive us (1:9)

Claim #3: They say they live in a state of sinlessness (1:10)

-Response: To claim sinlessness is to make God a liar (1:10)

#### **III. Obedience as Evidence of Abiding in God (2:3-11)**

John stresses obedience to God's command as a source of assurance of knowing God. Following the assertion that obedience is the characteristic mark of true knowledge of God, John provides three claims of the false teachers. Rather than using "if we say" (ἐάν εἴπωμεν), as in the previous section, John employs "the one who says" (ὁ λέγων) to signal the claims of the secessionists.

Claim #1: They say that they have come to know God and yet do not keep his commands (2:4)

-Response: The love of God is made complete in those who obey his word (2:5)

Claim #2: They say that they walk in Him (2:5b-6a)

-Response: Those who walk in Him will walk as Jesus walked (2:6b)

Claim #3: They say they are in the light (2:9)

-Response: Those who love are in the light and the ones who hate are in the darkness (2:10-11)

#### **IV. Rejection of Worldliness as Evidence of Abiding in God (2:12-17)**

John encourages the true believers, those loyal to the apostle's teaching, that their sins have been forgiven, they have come to a deep knowledge of God, and they have overcome the devil (2:12-14). This is an affirmation intended to affirm and establish the believers in their faith over against the efforts of the false teachers to lead them astray. John also insists that love for the world, that sphere which is under the control of the evil one and the way of life promoted and under the power of evil is contrary to love for the Father (2:15-17).

## **V. Rejection of the Antichrists as Evidence of Abiding in God (2:18-28)**

This section begins and ends with the direct address "little children." John begins by asserting it is the last hour. That is, history has entered the final stage of God's dealings with the world. This final stage began with the death of Jesus and will continue until the day of resurrection and judgment at the end of history. In this last hour, John warns against being deceived by the false teachers. These false teachers set themselves up as *substitute* Christs and *in opposition* to the true Christ, that is, they are antichrists. This term is found only in 1 Jn 2:18, 22; 4:3; and 2 Jn 7. The general idea of a powerful figure appearing in connection with the culmination of history can be found in Mark 13; 2 Thess 2:1-12; and Rev 12-13. John, however, insists that (1) there are "many" antichrists; and (2) they are not far off in the future but emerged out of the very churches that John addressed. While the church then and now might expect a larger-than-life, evil, destructive leader to arise as an opponent, false teaching about the nature and work of Christ is a far more dangerous ongoing threat. The secessionists were the antichrists who were already active in the world.

John also points to powerful resources the true believer has so as to not fall prey to the false teachers: (1) the anointing of the Holy Spirit (2:20-21; 26-27); (2) the litmus test of the denial that Jesus is the Christ as clear evidence of antichrist (2:22-23); and (3) the Apostles' teaching (2:24-25).

This section began with a declaration "it is the last hour." Appropriately, John brings it to a conclusion with a reference to the last day where believers will stand unashamed at the appearing of Jesus (2:28).

## **VI. Practicing Righteousness as Evidence of Being the Children of God (2:29-3:10)**

John constructs this section around two imperatives: "see" in 3:1 and "do not allow anyone to mislead you" in 3:7. The first command is to "see" the greatness of the Father's love, resulting in adoption into God's family. This reality should lead to a distinct change of behavior. True believers, the children of God, *will* practice righteousness. The way a person chooses to live indicates their family identity, whether they are born of God or of the devil.

John's statement in 3:6, "whoever abides in Him does not sin; No one who sins has seen Him nor has come to know Him," is difficult to harmonize with 1 Jn 1:8, "if we say that we do not have sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us," and also 1 Jn 1:10, "if we say that we have not sinned, we make him a liar and his word is not in us." Perhaps the best way to make sense of it is to translate the present tense verb for sin in 3:6 as "continually sin." Thus, John argues that those who abide in God are not able to practice sin habitually or continually. That type of life is incompatible with living as a son or daughter of God. While a believer may commit isolated acts of disobedience, they will not make it deliberate habit. John concludes the section with the command, "do not allow anyone to mislead you" (3:7) on the matter of living obediently as evidence that one is truly born of God.

## **VII. Love of Fellow Believers as Evidence of Abiding in God (3:11-24)**

This section connects directly with the previous section using the causal "because/for," showing the basis for the claim in 3:10 that the one who does not love brother/sister is not of God. Refusing to love your brother/sister is a rejection of the most basic message of Jesus and the apostles. It is "the message which you heard from the beginning" (3:11; see Jn 13:34; 15:12, 17). Unlike elsewhere in the New Testament, however, John's emphasis is on love for fellow believers, not for one's neighbor. The schism created by the false teaching of the secessionists drives this nuance. If the true church was to survive, it would have to pull together in love for fellow believers. John also details the nature of genuine Christian love. It is more about

sacrificially pouring oneself out to meet the needs of others than it is simply an affair of the heart.

Finally, John highlights a related spiritual principle: if you live a righteous life marked by love, those whose works are evil will hate you (3:12-13). John employs the story of Cain's murder of Abel as evidence. If our lives are marked by love, we can have confidence in God's grace, which puts our often-condemning heart at ease (3:19-24).

### **VIII. Confession of Jesus' Humanity Is *the* Test of the Spirit of Truth (4:1-6)**

In a world filled with competing claims of spiritual truth, not all claims are valid. In the case of John's audience, discerning valid from false claims about Jesus was made even more difficult since there was not yet a New Testament canon. John insists that the ultimate test of truthfulness is whether or not a prophet/teacher confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh, i.e., the incarnation. The affirmation that Jesus is the divine-human person forms the fundamental doctrine of Christianity, one that can't be compromised without devastating consequences. The standard for evaluating the truthfulness of a teacher or teaching is the apostolic witness, which is now embodied in the New Testament. Any truth claims that contradict or are inconsistent with the teaching of the New Testament must be rejected as false.

### **IX. God is Love: Abide in Him (4:7-16)**

At the beginning of the letter, John declared that God is light (1:5). Now, in that latter stages he makes a parallel declaration: God is love (4:16). This is more than a statement of what God does; it declares who God is. Thus, everything God does is loving activity. Because God is love, God is the source and inspiration of love within the community of faith. God's love was supremely demonstrated in the sending of his Son as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (4:10). At the cross, the tension between the love of God and the justice of God find resolution. God focused his love on the problem of sin and our need for redemption. The result is that the ultimate demonstration of love is the violent death of God's Son. Ultimately, this kind of self-giving love is presented as the characteristic mark of the true followers of Christ (4:11-16).

### **X. God's Love Produces Confidence and Empowers Love for Others (4:17-5:3)**

This section describes the fruit of God's love in the life of the believer. First, when God's love is perfected in believers, they will have confidence in the day of judgment. Such perfected love casts out the fear of judgment (4:17-18). Next, God's love produces love for fellow believers. In fact, the failure to love others proves a lack of love for God (4:19-21). Finally, the love of God produces in us a desire to live obediently. As God's love matures in us, we find God's commands become less burdensome and more liberating (5:1-3).

### **XI. Believing in Jesus, Who Came by Water and Blood, Enables Victory Over the World and Guarantees Eternal Life (5:4-13)**

John argues that those who have faith, and thus are born of God, overcome the world. John defines "world" as those worldly values that are opposed to the values of God. The object of overcoming faith is not some generic savior, but faith in Jesus who came not only by water but also by blood. While John provides no interpretation, it is nearly certain that "water" refers to Jesus' physical birth or baptism. "Blood" likely points to Jesus' atoning death. To say that he came by water only would detract from the necessity and glory of the cross. Thus, Jesus came by water and by blood, highlighting the two critical points in the earthly ministry of Jesus. In 5:8, John adds a third witness, "the Spirit," to the water and blood.

In this text we are confronted with one of the most significant textual variants in Scripture, the *Johannine Comma* (sentence) in 1 Jn 5:7-8. Most modern translations read as follows at 1 Jn 5:7-8: “for there are three that bear witness, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three agree” (see the TNIV, NASB, HCSB).

The KJV & NKJV include the following at 1 Jn 5:7-8: "for there are three that bear witness *in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit, and these three agree; and there are three that bear witness on earth*, the Spirit, the water, and the blood, and these three agree."

The longer reading found in the KJV is found in only a handful of Greek manuscripts, with the earliest being the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Furthermore, the passage is never quoted by the Greek Fathers, who most certainly would have made use of the text in their debates about the relationship of Father, Son, and Spirit had the text been known to them. Furthermore, it is very difficult to explain why the longer reading would have disappeared if it had been original. It is easy to explain how a scribe might have added it due to the impulse to interpret the threefold witness of Spirit, water, and blood allegorically as a reference to the Trinity. In summary, it is a virtual certainty that John did not write the additional phrase between verses 7-8.

## **XI. Final Assurance and Exhortation: (5:14-21)**

In the final section, John reiterates the major topics of the letter. He affirms the confidence that true believers have knowledge of the true God and eternal life. He also speaks of the confidence the true believer has in prayer (5:14-15), although he cautions against praying for someone who has committed a sin that leads to death (5:16-17). Perhaps the secessionists had committed such a sin by their refusal to confess Jesus as the Christ in human flesh.

The letter concludes in 1 Jn 5:21 with a warning against idols, an ending that seems rather surprising upon first glance. Nowhere preceding 5:21 has the author referred to idols. In the Old Testament, idols were set up in opposition to the one true God. Thus, they represented counterfeit gods. This would include not only wood and stone images, but false or counterfeit views or beliefs about God. In the context, the idolatry John commands his readers to avoid likely relates to the false teaching of the secessionists. They were pedaling false notions about God, trying to seduce the believers to leave the "true God," and thus to go over to false gods. This would, in fact, constitute idolatry. John thus concludes with a powerful challenge to his readers to choose whether they will worship the true God, who has made himself known in Christ, or a counterfeit god derived from human imagination. The challenge remains the same for believers in the 21st century.

## **2 John**

- I. Letter Opening (2 Jn 1-3)
- II. Living in Truth and Love (2 Jn 4-6)
- III. Warning Against False Teachers (2 Jn 7-11)
- IV. Letter Closing (2 Jn 12-13)

## **3 John**

- I. Letter Opening (3 Jn 1-4)
- II. Gaius Praised for Showing Hospitality (3 Jn 5-8)
- III. Diotrephes Denounced for Selfish Ambition (3 Jn 9-10)
- IV. Demetrius Praised (3 Jn 11-12)
- V. Letter Closing (3 Jn 13-15)