

# A Survey of John's Epistles

Gregory A. Smith

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## The Epistles' Author

None of the three epistles we know as John's name their author. The rationale for Johannine authorship is based on the following lines of evidence:

- ❖ The author of 1 John refers to himself as an eyewitness of the ministry of Jesus Christ (1:1-3).
- ❖ The author of the epistles portrays himself as one with spiritual authority (e.g., 3 John 10).
- ❖ The style and content of the epistles is consistent with that of the Gospel of John. According to Merrill C. Tenney, "If the criteria of vocabulary and style are ever adequate for pronouncing judgment on authorship, these three short letters must be attributed to one author who is also the author of the Fourth Gospel."<sup>1</sup>
- ❖ There is "an impressive church tradition" that identifies John as their author.<sup>2</sup> "Early Christian writers including Irenaeus, Clement of Alexandria, and Tertullian cited the epistle [of 1 John] as John's."<sup>3</sup>

There is substantial evidence to indicate that John ministered in Asia Minor (the western part of modern-day Turkey). Tradition places him as a church planter in Ephesus.<sup>4</sup> The book of Revelation, penned by John, addresses seven churches in this part of the Roman world. It appears that a sizable group of first-century believers, including various churches and leaders, sat under John's teaching and were exposed to his writings. Scholars refer to this group as the Johannine community.

## The Epistles' Date

The epistles are similar enough in content and emphasis to be dated at a similar time. Since the author of 1 John identifies himself as an eyewitness of Jesus' ministry, the date of authorship can scarcely be later than AD 100. However, there are few, if any, clues within the letters that help to place the date more specifically. Among conservative authors, a fairly late date--around AD 90 or later--has traditionally been preferred. However, some are now suggesting a date around AD 70.<sup>5</sup>

## The Epistles' Context

No firm historical or geographic details are provided in the letters themselves. Scholars typically identify the recipients as one or more churches in Asia Minor. The place of writing is unknown.

More important is the spiritual context of the epistles, some of which may be discerned from their content. It is apparent that John wrote in the midst of a crisis--a defection in which certain professing Christians had separated themselves from genuine believers, denying certain apostolic teachings concerning the Person of Jesus Christ (1 John 2:18-19, 22-23; 4:1-3; 2 John 7-9).

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<sup>1</sup> Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey, Revised*, rev. Walter M. Dunnnett (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans; Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 374.

<sup>2</sup> Gary M. Burge, "John, Letters of," *Dictionary of the Later New Testament & Its Developments*, ed. Ralph P. Martin and Peter H. Davids (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1997), 587.

<sup>3</sup> Zane C. Hodges, "1 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures by Dallas Seminary Faculty: New Testament*, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, Ill.: Victor Books, 1983), 881.

<sup>4</sup> Burge, "John," 588.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 595; Hodges, "1 John," 882.

It is unclear just what heresy or heresies were threatening John's community. Some possibilities include docetism, gnosticism, Cerinthianism, and emperor worship.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the exact identity of the heresy, it posed a serious threat to the gospel and could not be tolerated. Rather than specifically defining the nature of the problem, John discusses it in function of its threat to sound doctrine. As a result, the principles he gives can be applied to any philosophy or religion that denies the cardinal truths of the Christian faith.

### **The Epistles' Structure**

John's second and third epistles have the kinds of features normally found in letters--authors, recipients, personal names, greetings, and overt references to events, to name a few. As such their overall structure and purpose are fairly easy to discover. By contrast, 1 John bears few of these traits. Some regard its content to be more like a sermon or essay. According to one commentator, "The First Epistle of John is notoriously difficult to outline."<sup>7</sup> Merrill Tenney explains:

The peculiar style of John appears at its best in I John because the epistle is short enough to show clearly its type of structure. I John is symphonic rather than logical in its plan; it is constructed like a piece of music rather than like a brief for a debate. Instead of proceeding step by step in unfolding a subject, as Paul does in Romans, John selects a theme, maintains it throughout the book, and introduces a series of variations, any one of which may be a theme in itself.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Epistles' Purposes**

John states the purpose of his first epistle in the following terms: "These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God" (1 John 5:13). Thus the letter aims to provide assurance of salvation to those who have exercised genuine faith in Christ. However, the same truths that would reassure true believers would condemn those who had rejected the faith. As a result, the epistle seems to alternate between affirming the characteristics of a true Christian and indicting secessionists for their infidelity to the apostolic doctrine.

Therefore, 1 John has two major purposes:

- ❖ To combat teachings that were antagonistic to true Christianity
- ❖ To discuss the marks of a true Christian

The aims of 2 John are quite similar to those of the first epistle. 2 John's recipients, "the elect lady and her children," are most likely the members of a local church. The letter reminds them of the centrality of love to Christian living (4-6) and warns them of the danger of tolerating doctrinal impurity (7-11). 3 John addresses two church leaders. First, it commends Gaius for his hospitable treatment of itinerant missionaries (5-8). Second, it indicts Diotrephes for his tyrannical, self-centered approach to church leadership (9-10).

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<sup>6</sup> Burge, "John," 590-93; Tenney, *New Testament*, 375-76; Hodges, "1 John," 881; Keener, *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 735-36. Keener explains: "On the one hand, the issue in view might be simply some false prophets (1 Jn 4:1-6) advocating compromises with the imperial cult to save one's life. On the other hand, the issue might be one of the heresies that was developing toward full-blown Gnosticism. Docetists believed that Christ was divine but only seemed to become human (cf. 4:2); Cerinthians (followers of Cerinthus) believed that the Christ-Spirit merely came on Jesus, but denied that he was actually the one and only Christ (cf. 2:22)" (pp. 735-36).

<sup>7</sup> Hodges, "1 John," 882.

<sup>8</sup> Tenney, *New Testament*, 377.

## The Epistles' Themes

The epistles repeatedly address two major themes. Gary Burge explains: "John returns to two major subjects repeatedly as he writes: christology [i.e., the doctrine of the person and work of Christ] and ethical behavior. And it is likely that the two are intimately connected. The secessionists had embraced an aberrant form of christology that led them to make wrong judgments about Christian living."<sup>9</sup>

Craig Keener agrees: "John advocates testing the spirits by two main tests: a moral-ethical test (keeping the commandments, especially love of the Christian community) and a faith test (the right view of Jesus)."<sup>10</sup> These two themes are summarized in 1 John 3:23: "And this is his commandment, That we should believe on the name of his Son Jesus Christ, and love one another, as he gave us commandment."

## The Doctrinal Test

**The essential question:  
Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God?**

*Jesus possessed full humanity. The fact of his humanity was verified by the sensory perception of his disciples. As the eternal Word of God, he was fully God as well.*

1 John 1:1-3 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, of the Word of life; (For the life was manifested, and we have seen it, and bear witness, and shew unto you that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us;) That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ.

*The denial of Jesus' identity as the Christ is the supreme lie. There are those who profess to be Christians who will eventually defect because of their denial of Christ.*

1 John 2:18-19, 22-23 Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us. . . . Who is a liar but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist, that denieth the Father and the Son. Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also.

*A basic test of Christian orthodoxy is an individual's belief concerning Christ's incarnation. To deny that Jesus was God in flesh is to oppose God.*

1 John 4:1-3 Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world. Hereby know ye the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesseth that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is of God: And every spirit that confesseth not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and this is that spirit of antichrist, whereof ye have heard that it should come; and even now already is it in the world.

*Belief in Jesus as the Son of God is a most basic test of Christian faith.*

1 John 4:15 Whosoever shall confess that Jesus is the Son of God, God dwelleth in him, and he in God.

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<sup>9</sup> Burge, "John," 590.

<sup>10</sup> Keener, *IVP Bible Background*, 736.

*Personal regeneration is associated with belief in Jesus' identity as the Christ.*

1 John 5:1 Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him.

*The reality of Jesus' humanity was attested to by his physical constitution: His body contained literal blood and water. It is also affirmed by the Holy Spirit. Belief in Jesus' dual character as God and man is the basis for victory over the world.*

1 John 5:5-6 Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God? This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.

*Believers stand to lose rewards by departing from the truth of Christ's incarnation, they are not to fellowship with those who deny it.*

2 John 7-11 For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward. Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son. If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not into your house, neither bid him God speed: For he that biddeth him God speed is partaker of his evil deeds.

### The Practical Test

**The essential question:  
Do you practice love for fellow Christians?**

*The genuineness of a person's Christian profession is evidenced by his or her love for others. Hatred is a sign of spiritual darkness. Love, on the other hand, is the fruition of a proper relationship to God and his commandments.*

1 John 2:4-5, 9-11 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him. But whoso keepeth his word, in him verily is the love of God perfected: hereby know we that we are in him. . . . He that saith he is in the light, and hateth his brother, is in darkness even until now. He that loveth his brother abideth in the light, and there is none occasion of stumbling in him. But he that hateth his brother is in darkness, and walketh in darkness, and knoweth not whither he goeth, because that darkness hath blinded his eyes.

*Brotherly love is a normal part of the Christian life. Believers should seek to emulate Christ's sacrificial love in their human relationships.*

1 John 3:10-11, 14-18 In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother. For this is the message that ye heard from the beginning, that we should love one another. . . . We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth.

*Brotherly love is a basic test of genuine Christianity. The Christian should be motivated to love by God's loving atonement for human sin. Though God is invisible, his presence among Christians is made known to the world by their love for one another.*

1 John 4:7-8, 10-12 Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love. . . . Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we ought also to love one another. No man hath seen God at any time. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and his love is perfected in us.

*Love defines the character of God and that of all who dwell in him.*

1 John 4:16 And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.

*A person's love for the invisible God can only be measured by his or her love for visible men and women.*

1 John 4:20-21 If a man say, I love God, and hateth his brother, he is a liar: for he that loveth not his brother whom he hath seen, how can he love God whom he hath not seen? And this commandment have we from him, That he who loveth God love his brother also

*A believer's love for God is expressed through love for God's children. Loving God, loving fellow men, and obeying God's commandments are an inseparable whole.*

1 John 5:1-3 Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.

*Believers' love for each other is the central mark of their faith. Love is defined as obedience to God's commandments.*

2 John 5-6 And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it.