

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE NEW TESTAMENT

First Baptist Church Dandridge – Fall 2024

Dr. Justin Terrell

justin@fbcdandridge.org

The General Epistles III

1-3 John

As the church continued to grow toward the end of the first century, so did the presence of false teachers and unbiblical doctrine. It was just as Jude had warned in his earlier letter, "*certain people have crept in unnoticed...ungodly people, who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ*" (Jude 4). With the truth of the gospel being distorted and believers being led astray, John wrote a series of letters detailing true faith and salvation against those who taught otherwise. Many regard 1 John as the greatest book in the Bible for clarifying salvation, giving clear evidence of what authentic faith looks like. 2-3 John give warnings about the false teachers and problematic people in the churches, along with their schemes.

- 1. Authorship:** While these letters appear to be written anonymously, strong tradition maintains that the author was the apostle John, the same one who wrote the Gospel of John. According to the Gospels, John the son of Zebedee was one of Jesus' twelve disciples. He joined Peter and James as those in Jesus' inner circle, who were privileged with more personal time and supernatural experiences than the others. According to John's Gospel, he was "*the one whom Jesus loved*" (13:23; 20:2), giving the impression that John had a much closer relationship with Christ than most. It's often been assumed that John was the youngest of the disciples. When he reports running with Peter to see the empty tomb, John makes clear that he "*outran Peter and reached the tomb first*" (20:4). Such a young age makes sense since John was believed to have lived shortly into the second century, reaching the age of 100. Several early Christian writers believed that John survived his exile on Patmos under Domitian, and later returned to Ephesus, where he ministered until the time of his death during the reign of Trajan (AD 98-117) (Hill, 484). An older John seems to fit the context of his letters because he refers to himself as the "*father/elder*" writing to his "*little children*" (2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). Given the fact that the Gospel of John and 1-3 John contain many similarities in language, style, and content, it's hard to argue against John's authorship (Barton, 1).
- 2. Date:** The older age of John corresponds with the supposed dates these letters were written, which many believe to be written from Ephesus between AD 85-100. It's also been noted that the particular heresies dealt with in 1-2 John are consistent with developments in the late first century (Hill, 484).
- 3. Audience**

- a. **1 John:** As persecution broke out in Jerusalem around AD 70, John gathered a group of Samaritan and Jewish converts and migrated to Asia Minor, where he had a successful ministry among the Gentiles. Most believe this ministry took place in or near Ephesus. While there, John wrote his Gospel around AD 80-85. However, some of the members developed a wrong understanding of Jesus (perhaps under the influence of Gnosticism) and formed a rival group. These wayward members left the church, proving that they didn't belong to Jesus. He writes, *"They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us"* (2:19). Therefore, John wrote his first letter (1 John) to clarify the truth about Jesus and how one can be sure they know him.
- b. **2 John:** By beginning the letter, *"The elder to the elect lady and her children"* (2 John 1:1), many believe that John was writing this letter to a different congregation. It could have been a house church in the same area. However, he wrote to warn against the dangers of traveling preachers, some of whom are *"deceivers, who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh"* (1:7). Beale suggests that these false teachers could have been some of those who previously left the church (Beale, 450). Following his Gospel and first letter, John emphasizes that believers should walk in truth and love.
- c. **3 John:** In his third letter, John is writing to Gaius about the activities of Diotrephes, who *"likes to put himself first"* and *"does not acknowledge our authority"* (3 John 1:9). Apparently, Diotrephes was a trouble-maker in the church who didn't respect John, his messengers, or local leaders. He would even remove people from the church who didn't side with him (1:10). John reminds the church to follow the example of Demetrius and *"do not imitate evil but imitate good"* (1:11).

4. Contents

- a. **Jesus' Nature:** One of the early heresies the church faced was Gnosticism and Doceticism. The word "Gnosticism" comes from the Greek word for "knowledge." It was believed that the universe was made up of two opposing forces: the spiritual and the physical. The physical was evil and the spiritual was good. Therefore, salvation was achieved by receiving "special knowledge" that would liberate our good souls from our evil bodies. When it comes to Jesus, if he was truly God, it would be impossible for him to be physical. Therefore, Jesus wasn't a real human. The word "doceticism" comes from the Greek word *"dokien,"* which means "to seem." In relation to Jesus, it was taught that Jesus only seemed to have a real human body. His life, suffering, death, and resurrection were not physical and real. His real nature was nothing more than a spirit. However, this teaching removes the possibility of Jesus being the true savior of the world. He had to be both God and man in order to accomplish salvation. Therefore, from the beginning, John reminds his readers of Jesus' human nature.
 - **1 John 1:1-4** – *"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the*

word of life—the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

- b. **Theology:** Some have suggested that the gnostic teachers alluded to the God of the Old Testament as a violent, unloving, and mean God, while the God of the New Testament is full of love, grace, and kindness. However, John states in 1:5, *“God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.”* He concludes his teaching in the letter by stating, *“This is the true God and eternal life”* (5:20). In other words, John wants to give the church a true picture of God.
- c. **Assurance:** It’s been noted that John’s letter contains a list of “assurance tests” or “marks of a true Christian” (Kruger, 489). This content came in response to so many leaving the church. John wanted people to know that not everyone who professes faith in Christ truly belongs to him, such as those who deserted John’s ministry and teachings. So, how would someone know if they truly belong to the Lord? He gives a list of doctrinal and behavior standards that should accompany true believers. He uses words such as *“know,” “be sure,” “abides,”* and *“belong to him,”* along with specific actions and beliefs.

Some have summarized these as three tests: **Doctrinal** (what is your belief about Jesus Christ?); **Moral** (how do you respond to Christ’s commands); **Love** (how do you view and treat others?).

- **1 John 1:6** – *“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.”*
- **1 John 2:4** – *“Whoever says ‘I know him’ but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him.”*
- **1 John 2:10-11** – *“Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes.”*
- **1 John 4:7-8** – *“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.”*
- **1 John 5:1** – *“Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ has been born of God.”*
- **1 John 5:13** – *“You who believe in the name of the Son of God...may know that you have eternal life.”*

- d. **False Teachers:** One of the main concerns for John is the presence of false teachers. Apparently, these corrupt leaders were responsible for influencing members of the church and leading them away. Therefore, he wants to call them out for who they are. One of the descriptions he gives them is "antichrists." This description is highly theological. Daniel, Jesus, Paul, and Peter all describe a mysterious, evil eschatological figure that will emerge before Jesus returns and lead the world away from God. John states, "*Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come*" (2:18-19). While John affirms the future arrival of a final "antichrist," he warns the "many antichrists" have already appeared. This language indicates that the same evil, rebellious spirit of the final antichrist is at work in these false teachers.
- **1 John 4:2-3** – "*By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already.*"
 - **2 John 7** – "*For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist.*"
 - **Application:** The church must be aware of those with the spirit of the antichrist today. Sometimes people think of evil dictators like Hitler, Saddam Hussein, and Osama bin Laden, etc., but the real antichrists are the false teachers, who deny Jesus, distort the gospel, disagree with the Bible, and drive people away from God.