

1,2,3 JOHN: THE BASIS AND PRACTICE OF CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP

INTRODUCTION

The first letter of John is not addressed to anyone in particular, while the second and third letters are. This implies that the first letter may be intended for a wider audience.

Originally, there was no author's name attached to the letter, and there is nothing in the letters to indicate who the author would be. So how did the early church determine that John was the author?

First, there is much in the letters that is taken from the gospel of John directly and in style. The focus on truth and love, the opposition of light and darkness, reference to the new commandment (to love), to the Word of God who is Jesus Christ, who laid down his life for his friends, 'abiding' in Christ, focus on 'eternal life,' and much more, are signature marks of the gospel of John.

How do we know it is John the disciple/apostle? At the opening of his first letter he refers to having "heard"... "seen with our eyes"... "looked at and touched with our hands"... the "word of life." He is an eye witness of Jesus, and has experienced direct fellowship with him.

When were these letters written? John is believed to have been the last of the apostles to die (reference to this at the end of John's gospel), and lived in Ephesus during the later years of his life, dying at about 100 AD. The gospel and letters are believed to have been written between 90 – 100 AD.

COMMENTARY

John struggled with a heretical movement called "Gnosticism". *Gnosis* means "knowledge" in Greek, and Gnostics believed that they had secret knowledge about God, Christ and salvation outside and above what was in the bible. Gnostics also believed that 1) Jesus only appeared to be human and was not really human, but purely divine. The human Jesus was not really Jesus the Christ. 2) They needed to believe this because for them, evil and sin are related to the body. A spiritual person overcomes their physicality and lives through their mind and spirit. Hence, every physical blessing was mistrusted, and it was wrong to enjoy living through your senses – eating, drinking, having sex, enjoying life on this earth, etc. Gnostics were encouraged to live as ascetically as possible, as a way of overcoming their bodies.

Or else, on the other extreme, they could do whatever they wanted through their bodies because only what you did spiritually counted. Thus, whether you ate, drank, had sex, indulged, immorally or not, didn't ultimately matter as long as you knew and believed that spiritually you belonged to God. Your body would decay and disappear after you died, and your spirit would be freed to live on unencumbered.

John's letters contradict the Gnostic mentally in the strongest possible terms.

- 1) Jesus was fully human, and John is an eyewitness to this. He not only saw Jesus but touched him and had physical, human to human fellowship with him.
- 2) It was necessary that Jesus be human, because his death on the cross dealt with human sin and evil once and for all (atonement means forgiveness).
- 3) Jesus death on the cross was motivated by his having come from God the creator/Abba/father out of love for the world. Dealing with corruption, evil and suffering require justice, but justice that is defined by forgiving love. Without forgiveness justice is simply an eye for an eye, and in the end, who is left standing? Love resurrects relationships, reconciles people, and builds the kingdom of God on the other side of the destructiveness of human sin which leads to death.
- 4) Thus, the church is a sign of the new fellowship of God, based on forgiving/reconciling love, and truth/honesty/justice/light.
- 5) Christians are not only signs to the world by living in truth and love with each other, but also in living in the world without being caught up in the evils of the world. Such evils include – “the desire of the flesh and the eyes, and the pride of riches.” (2:16). What does this mean? Today we would understand it as materialism, prestige and popularity by what you own and your recognition by others, delight in power and privilege, etc. In contrast, John says: “We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses to help? (3:16-17)
- 6) John says that to be a Christian is not only about beliefs, but actions. To confess Christ as Saviour and Lord means that we live by love and act out of love in the world. Those who continue to commit sin (contradicting love is sin) cannot claim to believe in Christ truthfully. However, if we do sin (being human means that we will), we can repent and ask God to forgive us. That's what the cross is all about. But those who continue to sin and become complacent about God's commandments, cannot claim to be authentic Christians.

- 7) 'Perfect love,' claims John, is free of fear. What fear is he talking about? The fear of being judged or punished for doing wrong. If we really trust God's love for us, if we really believe that Christ death on the cross is a powerful achievement of forgiveness, and if we sincerely love those around us and pray for forgiveness when we fail to do so, we must feel at peace, not fearful and anxious. In contrast, those who may claim to believe in God but live complacently and dishonestly with hatred in their hearts, are the ones who should feel anxious and afraid.

We live in a world, today where many do not feel afraid in the sense of accountability, because many do not believe there is a God to whom our lives belong. On the other hand, we have many people who are anxious and afraid because their lives are beholden to the wrong things – their money, their popularity and place in the world, how others think of them, their privilege or lack of it, their success, etc. John's letter emphasizes both the goodness of life in the world and the right way to enjoy it and find blessings in it. It is through love that we enjoy this world. And lacking in love will only corrupt and poison whatever we experience and give to the world. Our fellowship as Christians, our care for one another, and our priority in giving and reaching out to the world, is meant to be a sign of an alternative way of living, as God has made us and intended us to live. We have been awakened and convicted to this through the gift of faith and the Spirit of God.