



The 1st, 2nd & 3rd Letters of John

The three letters of John are tucked away in the back of the New Testament and for that reason often not studied with as much focus and attention as the Gospels and letters of Paul. However, as Scripture written by the beloved disciple, John (the son of Zebedee), they stand with importance and practical relevance to the church.

These three letters were written sometime around 85-100 AD. They represent some of the final thoughts of the Apostle as he addresses theological and practical concerns in the church. The concern for the apostles as they were approaching their deaths was to insure that the message and practice of the faith did not die with them.

John has traditionally been associated with the church in Ephesus. These letters were likely written from Ephesus to congregations and members in the churches of the Asia Minor region (modern day Turkey). Each of the letters addresses specific and unique subject matters but they are all consistent in their concerns for the authentic Christianity to manifest in the life and fellowship of the Church.

1 John: Assurance for the Authentic Christian

Chapters 1-5

The 1st letter lacks the typical identifiers of a letter which would name to and from whom it is written. The original audience is often assumed to be the churches in the region of Asia Minor listed in the book of Revelation. The book is often compared to the Gospel of John for its similarities in thematic content and literary structure.

The main purpose of the letter is to provide discernible knowledge to Christians as to the nature of authentic and inauthentic Christianity. John writes “that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13) He uses the two Greek words for “know” in over 30 verses. Knowledge of the identity and practice of the true Christian is defined by knowledge of the nature and actions of God. God’s character attributes and divine actions define the true and authentic Christian character and walk. Simply put, if you know the true God, then you know a true Christian. The two main characteristics of God that John identifies are **Light** and **Love**. His first letter can be divided simply along these two major themes.

1 John	Chapters 1-5
Prologue: The Word of Life	1:1-4
Part One: God is Light/Walk in the Light	1:5-3:10
Part Two: God is Love/Walk in Love	3:11-5:12
Conclusion: That You May Know	5:13-21



Prologue: The Word of Life (1:1-5)

Like the Gospel of John, 1 John begins with a prologue. John opens his first letter with:

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—² 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—³ 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. ⁴ And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete. 1 John 1:1-5

Certainly, the themes of the prologue of John's Gospel find resonance here, "In the beginning was the word..." (John 1:1). However, the emphasis is not as much on the Word *made flesh* but on the Word *proclaimed* and the Word *written*. The Word of God in the world has moved from the incarnation to proclamation and inscripturation. Through the word of life proclaimed and written, believers may have fellowship with the apostles and with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ. That divine human connectedness will manifest itself primarily in two ways: in fellowship with the Light of God and in fellowship with the Love of God.

Part One: God is Light/Walk in the Light (1:5-3:10)

For John, the world is divided in two: Light and Dark. There are no "both/and" shades of grey. *Either* a person is walking in the Light of God *or* they are walking in darkness. "God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1:5). Therefore, authentic Christians walk in the light by

- Confessing with honesty the reality of sin in ones life (1:6-10).
- Repenting of their sins and walking in obedience to the word of God by the atoning grace of God (2:1-6)
- Obeying the command to love (2:7-11).
- Not Loving the World or things in the World (2:15-17)
- By knowing and confessing the truth of the anointing of Jesus in him (2:18-25) and from him (2:26-27).

John's desire is that the authentic believers in Jesus will have confidence (without shame) in Him and in their own status as those born of him.

See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him. ² Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not



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yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is. ³ And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as he is pure.

Essentially, being a child of God is to be one who walks in the light of God. God is holy and his holiness will be revealed in the character of those who are in his fellowship and family. The character of the believer will be one of sanctified obedience and righteousness. The continued practice of sinning is characteristic of the devil's work and character (3:8)

Part Two: God is Love/Walk in Love (3:11-5:12)

The second essential characteristic of the believer flows from the character of God's love.

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. -1 John 4:7

The Love of God in the Christian will be manifest in:

- Eschewing hatred or murder of brother (3:12-15)
- Sacrificial love in the form of generosity and help to brothers in need (3:16-18)
- Enjoying the *heart* assurance of our salvation by God's atoning grace (3:19-4:12)
- Abiding in his Holy Spirit and Love (4:13-21)
- Overcoming the World by our love for God and his commandments (5:1-5)
- Believing the testimony of God concerning his Son. (5:6-12)

The supreme manifestation of God's love is in the action of his Son, Jesus who died as the propitiation, as the payment to satisfy the just demands of the wrath and judgment of God for our sins (4:9) For John, we love because he first loved us (4:19).

The quality, character and actions of our love is defined by the character and actions of a loving God who has come in the flesh to redeem his people from sin. Authentic Christians will without fear of condemnation or shame from God or men walk in the Light and Love manifest by Jesus Christ in the flesh. Authentic Christians will manifest that same light and love in their daily walk in the fellowship of believers.

Conclusion: That You May Know (5:13-21)

It is possible to be Christian born of God, saved unto eternal life and not truly know it. John would have us that we are children of God if we are truly walking in him. The purpose of the letter is to provide deep assurance to the authentic Christian.

It also is a letter which will serve as a test for inauthentic Christianity as well. Saying that you love God or are a follower of Jesus or God is not enough. There are only two ways and a person will be one or the



other. There is only: light and darkness, truth or lies, love or hatred, life or death, God or the devil. There is no middle ground.

We know that we are from God, and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one.

²⁰ And we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life. ²¹ Little children, keep yourselves from idols.

--1 John 5:20-21

2 John 1

John's second letter is written specifically to "the elect lady and her children". This could be a female pastor in the life of the church. But more likely this is referring to a congregation "the bride of Christ" (see Revelation 21-22) and the members as children. Verse 13 which sends greetings from "the children of your elect sister" would seem to confirm the reading of this as being to and from members of two sister congregations.

Building on the themes of the first letter, this letter concerns their practical reinforcement and accountability in the life of the church. The main charge is found in verses 10 and 11:

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. 2 John 1:10-11

The concern is not so much showing love to the people of this world, but rather extending the type of hospitality that would provide a false teacher with a base of operations to promote his or her false teaching. Such a platform, should be denied to those who do not bear the authentic marks of the faith reinforced by 1 John.

3 John 1

If 2 John is a charge not to extending hospitality to a false teacher, 3 John is written to encourage hospitality and support for those who do manifest an authentic Christianity.

⁵ Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶ who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. 3 John 1:5-8



In particular a certain member of the congregation, Diotrephes, has been denying fellowship to the right types of people.

In 3 John there are three names mentioned, Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius. Gaius is a leader who needs encouragement to hold the arrogant Diotrephes accountable for his inhospitable character. Demetrius is a test case for Gaius and the congregation. The call is to not be like Diotrephes or controlled by him, but rather be like Demetrius and welcome him. “Beloved, do not imitate evil, but imitate good.”

Gaius is a Commendable Christian (1-8): He is commended for walking truthfully (3-4) and is being encouraged to show hospitality (5-6) and minister generously (7-8) in the face of a fellow member who desires to be and do the opposite.

Diotrephes is a conceited Christian (or not). He is driven by prideful ambition (9) that manifests in insubordination to spiritual authority (9). He talks a “wicked nonsense” about the apostles (10) and all of this gives rise to a marked inhospitable behavior and controlling bullying(10).

Demetrius is a consistent and true Christian (11-12) who pursues a godly example (11) and possesses a good testimony (12). He is to be welcomed.

A Thematic Comparison of 2 and 3 John⁴

2 John	3 John
Written to a lady and her children	Written to a man and his acquaintances
Written to one who was entertaining the wrong visitors	Written about one who was refusing to entertain the right visitors
Need was for love to be balanced by truth	Need was for truth (?) to be balanced by love
Truth is the key	Love (hospitality) is the key
No personal names (1 John also)	Three personal names: Gaius, Diotrephes, Demetrius

The bottom line is that fellowship matters in the church. If we choose to fellowship with inauthentic Christians, it could very well lead to broken fellowship with true believers.

⁴ http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Resource_511/3%20John.pdf (p. 4)