

GENERAL EPISTLES: 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

INTRODUCTION

The books of 1, 2, and 3 John historically have been attributed to John, “the elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1) who is thought to be “the disciple whom Jesus loved” (John 13:23) and the author of the fourth Gospel. Composed in Ephesus likely around A.D. 90, 1, 2, and 3 John are written in a style (voice, mood, structure) similar to the Gospel of John.

The book of 1 John calls believers to walk in light and to love one another. John highlights Christ and his deity to combat the false doctrine “deceivers” are trying to spread. He continually reiterates how fellowship with Christ, walking in light, and loving one another give us confidence as children of God. The language of 1 John draws clear parallels with the fourth Gospel. Its discussion of the “beginning” (1 John 1:1), the “word of life” (1 John 1:1), and the contrast of light and darkness (1 John 1:5-7) is reminiscent of the prologue to John’s Gospel (even echoing key themes of Genesis).

A similar current runs through 2 John, reminding believers to abide deeply in Christ and love one another. He warns against false teachers and tells believers not to show hospitality toward them or offer any support. Likewise, 3 John leverages similar motifs to reinforce truth in opposition to falsehood. This letter is written to Gaius and commends the behavior and service of Gaius as an example to the local church (3 John 3-6), while denouncing the ungodly actions of Diotrephes, whose selfishness is all-consuming (3 John 9-10).

IMAGE FOR UNDERSTANDING

How can we discern what is true in comparison to what is counterfeit? Could you spot a counterfeit bill? What about detecting a scam? For many—friends, family members, and even grandparents—have been the unsuspecting victims of counterfeit scams. Maybe some of us in the wreckage of our sin have even knowingly participated in such a ruse!

From 1872-1900, many Americans fell for such scams! A counterfeit operation called the “Green Goods” was running rampant. It promised top-quality counterfeit money to those who would buy into the scheme. Those who fell for it offered up hard cash in return for the promise of large amounts of counterfeit money, but the counterfeit bills never came. Such promises were fraudulent with the victims instead receiving a box of sawdust, bricks, or strips of green paper. Knowing that they could be punished for buying into this scheme, many victims never complained to the authorities!

1, 2, and 3 John deals with similar schemes, and the elder John counsels believers exposed to false teachings devoid of true hope and promise. Detecting what is counterfeit, he points his fellow believers toward true fellowship (which walks in the light of truth and resists untruth). In 2 John, he writes to a woman and her children to abide in God’s commandments rather than false teaching.

Christians are defined by light and love, but they must also resist supporting those who attempt to destroy truth! Even 3 John follows these themes: the godly actions of Gaius are celebrated while the pride of Diotrephes (who rejects discipline and the correction of his brothers) is condemned. Gaius is also warned to follow the example of Demetrius, who will ultimately expose Diotrephes. How will you go about detecting falsehood in your own life? Walk in truth and love, holding fast to the fellowship God has provided us.

BOOK ORGANIZATION

1 John

- Conditions for Fellowship (1 John 1:1-2:14)
- Cautions to Fellowship (1 John 2:15-2:27)
- Characteristics of Fellowship (1 John 2:28-5:3)
- Consequences of Fellowship (1 John 5:4-21)

2 John

- Walk in truth and love (2 John 1-6)
- Watch out for deceivers (2 John 7-13)

3 John

- Live in Truth (3 John 1-8)
- Look Out for Troublemakers & Truthtellers (3 John 9-15)

JESUS IN THE BOOKS OF 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

1 John emphasizes the deity of Christ. Jesus Christ is the believer's righteous advocate before God the Father. John pushes back against gnostic, heretical philosophies by emphasizing the importance of Jesus' Incarnation (1 John 2:22, 4:2-3). In his testimony concerning the Son of God, John writes that Jesus is the one, "who came by water and blood" (1 John 5:6). Such statements stress the centrality of the Incarnation of God the Son. In a time when deceivers and antichrists were making their way into the church, John emphasizes the importance of clinging to the truth of Jesus as the Son.

2 John focuses on the similar error of Gnostics who denied and did "not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh" (2 John 7). Throughout his ministry, Jesus, the Son of God, is the same indivisible person—such a truth cannot be pushed aside. John expresses that to do so would be a failure to abide, "in the teaching of Christ" (2 John 9).

3 John endorses Christians who "have gone out for the sake of the name" (3 John 7-8). In the book of Acts, we see the apostles being beaten, persecuted, and even jailed for Jesus' name. Such men rejoiced that "they were counted worthy to suffer dishonor for *the name*." (Acts 5:41, emphasis added.) A proper understanding of Christ's person, incarnation, and works is essential in the pithy 3 John to fully digest its powerful words.

BIBLE STUDY SPECIFICS: HOW TO APPROACH THE BOOKS OF 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

OBSERVATION

- As you read 1, 2, and 3 John, answer the following questions and provide verse references for each. From there, take note of anything that is repeated or emphasized by the author.
 - The author isn't explicitly stated, but 2 and 3 John mention "the elder." Who is "the elder" writing to in each book? How can we identify the author from other New Testament writings?
 - What contrasts do we notice about people who are followers of Jesus and people who aren't?
 - What warnings are given to believers seeking fellowship within the body of Christ?

INTERPRETATION

How to interpret 1, 2, and 3 John:

- Literary context: Keep an eye out for the following literary devices used by the author:
 - Cyclical Repetition: Life, love, beloved, truth
 - "Life" (15x in 1 John)
 - "Love" (4x in 2 John; 2x in 3 John)

- “Beloved” (4x in 3 John)
- “Truth” (5x in 2 John; 6x in 3 John)
- Contrasts: Note how the author uses stark contrasts to emphasize his point—light vs. darkness; children of God vs. children of the devil; spirit of truth vs. spirit of error; Gaius vs. Diotrephes
- Narrative context: Where else in the New Testament do we see the authors of Scripture respond to heresies like gnosticism? How does John’s call to Christian fellowship compare to themes in the book of Acts? What internal evidence helps us determine that the Apostle John is the author of 2 and 3 John?
 - Internal evidence such as word usage and thematic and grammatical unity between 1, 2, and 3 John and the fourth Gospel help establish authorship by the Apostle John, identified in 2 and 3 John as “the elder.”
 - Like the Johannine epistles, 1 Timothy 6:20, Colossians 2:8, and 2 Corinthians 11:13-15 are examples of passages that refute false teaching.
- Historical context: What was happening at this point in history?
 - Acts 8:14 ties John with the “apostles at Jerusalem,” and later Paul calls him a “pillar” of the Jerusalem church (Galatians 2:9).
 - Early Christians/Church Fathers agree that the later ministry of John was located in Ephesus (a city of colossal importance in the Roman province of Asia).
- Cultural context: How can an understanding of false teachings like docetism and gnosticism protect Christian truth from heresy?
 - Gnosticism taught that the material world was corrupt/evil. Gnostics believed that they possessed a hidden knowledge (*gnosis*) that elevated their spiritual status.
 - Similarly, docetism (from *dokeo* meaning “to seem”) taught heretically that Christ only seemed to have a human form. It denied the Incarnation. Doctrines like these still rear their head in other forms.

APPLICATION

- Read in light of Christ.
- Is there a command to obey?
- Is there a sin to repent from?
- Is there a promise to cling to?
- Is there an example to follow? Or one to avoid?

PRAYER

- List 3-5 prayer points here.
- Pray that the Lord would equip you to testify against false teaching.
- Pray that God would help the Church strive for unity and love fellowship.
- As you confess your sins, pray that your heart would be directed to Jesus Christ, who is the perfect Advocate. Meditate on these verses in 1 John 1:5-9:

⁵ This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. ⁶ If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth. ⁷ But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. ⁸ If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. ⁹ If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

WHAT CHURCH HISTORY HAS SAID ABOUT THE BOOK OF 1, 2 & 3 JOHN

“John, the disciple of the Lord, has delivered this teaching in the aforementioned Epistle: ‘Little children, it is the last time: and as ye have heard that antichrist shall come, even now are there many antichrists.’”

—St. Irenaeus

Against Heresies (Book III, ch. 16)

