

The Letters of the Apostle John

The First Epistle of John

Objectives

1. To look at the three Epistles as an introduction into a deeper personal study.
 2. To become accustomed with the Author and his mystical approach and theology.
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1. Recommended Reading:

- For a good introduction to the Author of the Epistles of John read, Merrill Tenney, *John, The Gospel of Belief*, (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.: 1997).
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1. Dating:

- *circa* AD. 90
 - Writings exhibit a man of maturity who has enjoyed profound spiritual experiences
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2. Author:

- The Apostle John was the author. He was one of the 12 and thus walked with and witnessed firsthand the life and ministry of Jesus.
- John was also one of the 'Three' - the inner-circle, Jesus' intimate group within the Disciples, together with James (*his Brother*) and Peter. They were close to Jesus not because He preferred them, but they chose Him.
- In the Gospel of John, John refers to himself as 'the Disciple whom Jesus loved.' [John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7; 21:20]
- **'Now there was leaning on Jesus' bosom one of His disciples, whom Jesus loved.'** [John 13:23]. Here we see an image of an intimate relationship, that goes beyond simple 'Head' recognition of Jesus' true identity. John's closeness to Jesus allowed him to see more than the other disciples could see - not because Jesus revealed more to John but that John got close enough to not only to *meet* Jesus, but John got to *gināskō* (know) Jesus. John knew Jesus experientially.

- 1) **ginōskō** (know) to learn to know, come to know, get a knowledge of perceive, feel
 - a) to become known
 - 2) to know, understand, perceive, have knowledge of
 - a) to understand
 - b) to know
 - 3) Jewish idiom for sexual intercourse between a man and a woman
 - 4) to become acquainted with, to know
- John's relationship and deeper *experience* of Jesus introduces us into John's approach of, not only to his account of the Gospel, but also his three Epistles (1, 2, & 3 John) and the Book of The Revelation of Jesus Christ - John's approach (spirituality) is of a mystical nature - he sees beyond Flesh and Blood - he sees beyond the incident to the meaning imbedded within the event - he reads between the lines with a spiritual eye. He sees the invisible which is very present - he sees the hidden reality.
 - As the author of the three Epistles, John allows us to deepen also our own personal understanding and experience of Jesus - so that we also may **ginōskō** Him and have life.
 - John's method of knowing Jesus is through experiencing Jesus, i.e. phenomenologically (knowledge through experience).
 - John is the Cousin of Jesus, his Mother, Salome being the Sister of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. This also made the Apostle John the 2nd Cousin of John the Baptist, as Mary was the cousin of Elizabeth, John the Baptist's Mother (Luke 1:34-37 KJV).

Cousin John, the apostle John: <http://www.keyway.ca/htm2004/20041022.htm> (Wayne Blank)

Jesus Christ and the apostle John as cousins is not as obvious (people who have studied the Bible their entire lives have overlooked it, which is understandable because of how the proof is in pieces - I only discovered it myself a few years ago, in one of those eureka! moments), but the proof is there nevertheless, in two parts, each of which themselves are in two parts. Add them together and it becomes very clear.

First, standing among the women near the cross with Jesus' mother Mary was Salome (as identified by the apostle Mark in his Gospel account), who was Mary's sister (as the apostle John himself states in his Gospel account, as it turns out, about his own mother - Mark's Gospel account refers to her by name, John's Gospel account refers to her by her relationship to Mary), and therefore Salome was Jesus' aunt:

*"Now there stood by the cross of Jesus his mother, and **his mother's sister**, Mary the wife of Cleophas, and Mary Magdalene."* (John 19:25 KJV)

*"There were also women looking on afar off: among whom was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and **Salome**"* (Mark 15:40 KJV)

From the first part above we know that Salome was Mary's sister. Now, second, Salome is then also identified the *wife of Zebedee*, as John is identified as *the son of Zebedee*. The picture is then complete. Salome is identified as Mary's sister and John's mother - John was therefore Jesus' cousin.

*"And going on from thence, he saw other two brethren, **James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother**, in a ship with Zebedee their father"* (Matthew 4:21 KJV)

*"Among which was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James and Joses, and **the mother of Zebedee's children** [i.e. Salome, as identified in the first part, above]"* (Matthew 27:56 KJV)

- His Father was called Zebedee and his Brother James.
 - John was the only Apostle to not suffer Martyrdom and lived from c. AD. 6 - c. 100.
 - He's also known by the Church Fathers as: *John the Evangelist*, *John of Patmos* and the *Beloved Disciple*.
 - Before being a Disciple of Jesus, he and his Brother, James, were Disciples of John the Baptist.
 - James and John were known as the '**Sons of Thunder**' (Mark 3:17), which is in contrast to who John became - the '**Apostle of Love**'. In Luke 9 (v.51-56), James and John offered to command fire down from heaven to destroy the Samaritan Village, receiving a rebuke from the Lord. Here we see the effect of John's maturity through his mystical union with the risen Christ.
 - James his brother however died in AD. 44, being the first Christian Martyr.
 - John was present at the crucifixion of Jesus, where in Jesus' last act of compassion and love for His neighbour, bequeathed His Mother, Mary to John, His Disciple, to protect and care for her (Jn. 19: 25-27).
 - John later relocated together with Mary to Ephesus, (modern day Turkey) and later to Patmos, where he wrote the book of *The Revelation of Jesus Christ*.
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3. Audience:

- This was a 'circular' letter, meaning that it was a letter to be circulated around the various congregations near Ephesus, it was not written to one Christian Community.
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4. Purpose:

- (1 Jn. 5:13): '**These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.**'
- John clearly states his purpose for writing the 1st Epistle, '**[...] that you may know you have eternal life.**'
- Here we see John nearing the age of 84 years old, that the resulting effect of living a lifetime of intimate relationship with Christ, is the **assurance of Salvation**, which resonates with Jesus own words in Matt 7:23 '**And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me.**' Those that KNOW (ginōskō) Jesus are blessed with the internal conviction of assurance of salvation (1 Jn. 2:3-11 & 1 Jn. 3:2-3).
- John's Epistles were also a reaction against a prevailing heresy that would become the forerunner to Gnosticism (2nd cent.). Gnosticism held that material was essentially evil and spirit was essentially good - a dualistic approach to the

unity of God's creation (which He Himself declared in Gen 1:31: '**... indeed it was very good**'). This doctrine eventually led to a rejection of the Incarnation and hence the resurrection, and the erroneous belief that true God (being good) could not indwell human flesh (being evil). Therefore Jesus did not come in the flesh but in the mere appearance of flesh, as a phantom (1 Jn. 4:1-4).

- A consequence of this heresy is the separation of spirit (and soul) and body, and consequently relieves the spirit (and soul) from the sins of the body. Seeing as though the body is separate from the spirit (and soul) and essentially evil, it's sins are it's own and does not affect the state of the spirit (and soul). Thus John writes, '**Little children, let no one deceive you. He who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous. He who sins is of the devil, for the devil has sinned from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that He might destroy the works of the devil. Whoever has been born of God does not sin, for His seed remains in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been born of God.**' (1 Jn. 3:7-9).
- Gnosticism is a word derived from the Greek word: gnosis, meaning 'Knowledge'. Gnostics later taught that salvation could be attained by mental enlightenment, which came only to elite spiritual initiates, not to the ordinary Christian. Intellectual pursuits substituted faith, knowing not believing was the path to enlightenment - John vehemently spoke against this substitution of the basic foundation of the Gospel of Salvation i.e Faith and declaring that the Truth is in all who are in Christ: (1 Jn. 2:24-28).
- John's purpose in writing, then was to expose the heresy of the false teachers and to confirm the faith of the true believers.

5. **Content:**

- First John stresses the themes of love, light, knowledge and life. Love is the dominant element stressed. Those who have attained to being ruled by love is clear evidence that one is a Christian, the possession of LOVE not KNOWLEDGE is a sign of Christian maturity. Conversely the lack of love indicates that one is in darkness (1 Jn. 2:9-11; 3:10-23 & **4:7-21**).
- Christ is the antithesis of sin, and He has appeared that He may take away all our sins (1 Jn. 3:5). John lays down the gauntlet in v.6 '**Whoever abides in Him does not sin. Whoever sins has neither seen Him nor known Him.**'
- This fed into the mystical theology of the Monastic Desert Fathers, which understood that the goal of all monks was to attain perfection of heart, which in crudely simplistic terms meant, to reach the ecstatic state of the union of God's heart and that of the human heart i.e. that God's very own desires would become ours - that we would *want* (not obey) what God wanted for us.
- It was this mystical understanding of the depth of Christ's salvific work, that man could be freed from sin and become *truly* human once more.

- Being freed from the slavery of sin meant sharing in the divine nature of God and thus the Church Father of the 2nd Century said, *'The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself.'* (Irenaeus, Book 5, *Against Heresies*).
 - This mystical union and communion with the Messiah was not a relationship with a mere 'spiritual' witness (as the Gnostics believed) - no, the Messiah, Jesus was a real Man consisting of flesh and blood, thus John concludes his epistle by saying, ***'This is He who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ; not only by water, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who bears witness, because the Spirit is truth.'*** (1 Jn. 5:6). And further concludes with the purpose of his epistle, ***'For there are three that bear witness in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one. If we receive the witness of men, the witness of God is greater; for this is the witness of God which He has testified of His Son. He who believes in the Son of God has the witness in himself; he who does not believe God has made Him a liar, because he has not believed the testimony that God has given of His Son. And this is the testimony: that God has given us eternal life, and this life is in His Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son of God does not have life. These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.'*** (1 Jn. 5:7-13).
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6. Personal Application:

- Prominent in 1 John is the positive note of Christian certainty. Thirty-nine times the verb 'know' occurs. Christian truth is beyond the realm of speculation, because it is irrevocably moored to the historical event of Jesus Christ and the apostolic witness to that event.
- In addition Christians possess the anointing and witness of the Holy Spirit to assure them of the truth about God, Christ and their own spiritual standing.
 - Three tests prove the genuineness of Christianity:
 - a) the test of belief (1 Jn. 4:2)
 - b) the test of obedience (2:3)
 - c) and the test of love (4:20)
- The same affirmations are stated negatively. The one who professes to be a Christian, but who cannot pass the test of Belief, Obedience and Love, is a Liar (4:20).
- John brings all three tests together in (5:1-5), where he indicates that a profession of Christianity is false unless it is characterised by correct belief, godly obedience, and brotherly love - these tests continue to be valid for us today.

The Second Epistle of John

1. Purpose:

- John addresses his second epistle to **'The Elect Lady and her Children'** - some scholars believe this to be an actual Women, who obviously opened her house to visiting Ministers of the Church and some scholars believe this to be addressed not to an individual but rather the Church (the Bride - Elect Lady) and her Children, the Christians. Scholars remain divided on the matter.
 - The Second Epistle of John is concerned with the relation of Christian truth to hospitality. It is right to extend hospitality to traveling Teachers of the Church - but not to heretics.
 - The heretics ('*antichrists*', v.7), John is most likely referring to are the 'false teachers' he spoke of in his first epistle (1 Jn. 2). These 'Wolves' were to be refused hospitality.
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2. Content:

- Genuine Christian Teachers could be recognised by the orthodoxy of their message (v.10). John states: **'He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.'** (2 Jn. 1: 9-11)
 - The content of John's second epistle is to warn the Church (individuals and at large) that they should not host heretics and that these false teachers can be known by their acknowledgement that Christ came in the flesh.
 - This recognition that Christ came in the flesh was understood as orthodox teaching of the Church - an essential and universally accepted truth.
 - This rejection of the reality of Christ continued into the later centuries when some (the Docetists), argued that Christ was not present in the Eucharist either, to which St. Ignatius wrote: **'They abstain from the Eucharist and from prayer, because they confess not the Eucharist to be the flesh of our Saviour Jesus Christ, which suffered for our sins, and which the Father, of His goodness, raised up again. They who deny the gift of God are perishing in their disputes'**.
 - St. Ignatius (1st Century Church Father), was a Disciple of Apostle John.
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3. **Personal Application:**

- John's 1st century warning is still relevant for the contemporary Church. Apostle Paul warned his own Disciple of the danger of advancing beyond the doctrine of Christ, looking for 'special knowledge', Paul writes to Timothy: **'For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables.'** (2 Tim. 4:3-4).
- John warns against not **'abiding in the doctrine of God.'** (v.9), and warns that those who invite these false teachers into their homes, run the risk of being confused by their heretical teachings and consequently losing their faith.

The Third Epistle of John

1. **Purpose:**

- The tone of John's third epistle is more positive than his second. Instead of warning the Church against offering hospitality to Heretics, he now not only admonishes and encourages the Church to show gracious hospitality to the visiting Ministers of the Church but to also send them on their way in a 'worthy manner', which most probably means with a gift of some sort (v. 6), **'If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well'**.
- Two other issues are succinctly mentioned but not fully dealt with, which revolve around the person Diotrephes:
 - a) He is an over dominant person within the Church, and
 - b) who opposes John's authority
- Though John mentions these issues, he does not deal with them probably due to the fact that he has planned to resolve the situation in person when, **'we shall speak face to face.'** (v. 13).
- John addressed his third epistle to Gaius, encouraging him in his show of generosity and rebuking Diotrephes for his uncharitable conduct, which extend to excommunicating Church members for showing hospitality to traveling Teachers of the Church (v. 10), **'Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church.'**

2. **Content:**

- We see three personalities within the third epistle which accurately sum up the teachings of John's first and second epistle, they are:

- a) Gaius
 - b) Diotrophes
 - c) Demetrius
 - **Gaius** demonstrates the Christian faith through generous hospitality, even to Strangers. (**Belief**)
 - **Diotrophes**, whose selfish pride disrupted harmony of the Christian fellowship. (**Love**, a lack of)
 - **Demetrius**, whose life exemplified Christian fidelity. (**Obedience**)
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3. Personal Application:

- John's third epistle reveals the Church as the mystical Family of God, though we are many, we are one, though we are of different blood, we share in one, though we were Strangers, we are now Brothers, Sister, Fathers and Mothers - we are family.
 - Our Family is not united in common expression but is the bond of reciprocal love, expressed with it's members extending gracious hospitality towards one another - bearing with one another... Paul writes: **'I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with long-suffering, bearing with one another in love, endeavouring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.'** (Eph. 4:1-6).
 - Selfish ambition and factious jealousy imperil the church's fellowship, and it's members must guard against such attitudes.
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Conclusion:

- John's understanding is that Christian maturity is NOT based on some mystical acquisition of hidden knowledge, reserved for the special Initiates (i.e the Gnostic Leaders), but rather a Christian attains to maturity and perfection when he/she attains the ability to love their neighbour as themselves.
- (1 Jn. 4:7-11): **'7. Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. 9. In this the love of God was manifested toward us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through Him. 10. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. 11. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.'**

- Having this ability also assures 'boldness in the day of judgement'.
- (1 Jn. 4:17) **'Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness in the day of judgment; because as He is, so are we in this world.'**
- (1 Jn. 2:5) **'But whoever keeps His word, truly the love of God is perfected in him. By this we know that we are in Him.'**
- (1 Jn. 4:12) **'If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us.'**
- (Matt 22:37-40): **'Jesus said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." 38. This is the first and great commandment. 39. And the second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." 40. On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.'**
- (1 Jn. 3:16-17): **'16. By this we know love, because He laid down His life for us. And we also ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. 17. But whoever has this world's goods, and sees his brother in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?'**
- Christian maturity and perfection is LOVE not KNOWLEDGE.

References:

- *The commentaries of the Spirit-Filled Study Bible (NKJV)*
- Howell, Kenneth, *Ignatius of Antioch* (CHResources: Ohio, 2009).
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- Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* (Book 5).

Peace & Good in Christ +

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