

Through The Bible  
Session #59 – 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, & 3<sup>rd</sup> John  
March 15, 2006

The letters of John are treasured for their memorable teaching on love and forgiveness yet they were written in the midst of one of the fiercest conflicts in 1<sup>st</sup> century Christianity.<sup>1</sup> There is contrast between love (1 Jn. 4.8; 1 Jn. 4.11; 1 Jn. 4.19) and those opposed to Christ (1 Jn. 2.18-19; 1 Jn. 3.10; 1 Jn. 4.1, 3).

The author...

It was customary in antiquity for correspondence to begin by announcing the author's identity. Paul followed this rule in his letters, the letters of Peter, James, and Jude do as well. 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John somewhat identify the author as the Elder. Only Hebrews and 1<sup>st</sup> John don't begin with the author's name, title, or introductory greeting.<sup>2</sup>

Evidence suggests the author was all the same person.<sup>3</sup> Known as "the Elder."

This elder was probably a disciple or follower of John – the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 21.20, 24).<sup>4</sup>

The author could have been an eyewitness to some of Jesus' public ministry.

The three letters in comparison with one another...

1<sup>st</sup> John appears to be the most general of the letters. It was probably intended for several congregations.

2<sup>nd</sup> John is written to a specific congregation and refers to matters brought up in 1<sup>st</sup> John (emphasis on love and truth – see 2<sup>nd</sup> John 4-6).

3<sup>rd</sup> John is a letter to an individual.

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>2</sup> John R.W. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1990), p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 3.

## The three letters in comparison to the Gospel of John

While there are similarities, biblical scholars don't give conclusive evidence that the writer was the same.<sup>5</sup>

2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John could possibly be letters written by a Johannine community – or disciples of John.<sup>6</sup>

We should note that the book of Revelation also came from this same community of believers.<sup>7</sup>

## The Readers...

They were Christians who looked back to the disciple whom Jesus loved as their founder and teacher (Jn. 21.20-24).

This community of Christians most likely preserved the Gospel of John. The three letters of John were probably written about a decade after the Gospel.<sup>8</sup>

More than likely, these readers were living in the Roman province of Asia or modern day Turkey.<sup>9</sup> Early Christian traditions place the community more specifically around Ephesus.

The recipients of the letters appear to be meeting in houses as their places of worship which wasn't all that unusual for the early church.

## The Dating of the Letters...

If we accept a date of John's Gospel written around 80-90 AD, then the letters would have been written around 90-100 AD.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>8</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 4.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 4.

### Historical setting and reason for writing...

The Johannine community was shaped by John's witness and experiences of Jesus (see John 20.31).

These Johannine Christians were being persecuted and rejected. They were being expelled from the synagogues, removed from their homes and families (see Jn. 16.2; 9.22, 34-35; 12.42).

1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and 3<sup>rd</sup> John's crisis appears to be a church split.<sup>11</sup> A large and influential group has left the original group. The author calls them liars (1 Jn. 1.6; 2.4, 22; 4.20), deceivers (1 Jn. 2.26; 3.7; 2 Jn. 7), antichrists (1 Jn. 2.18, 22; 4.3; 2 Jn. 2.7), children of the devil (1 Jn. 3.10), murderers (1 Jn. 3.15), and false prophets (1 Jn. 4.1).

The issue in the split seems to be: Christology – teachings about Jesus; Pneumatology – teachings on the Holy Spirit; ethics – teachings on love and sin; and politics – the authority of the Elder.<sup>12</sup>

The letters were written to address this crisis. 1<sup>st</sup> John was written to refute the heretical views of those who left the community; 2<sup>nd</sup> John was written to warn a particular church about receiving those who are spreading heretical teachings; and 3<sup>rd</sup> John commends Gaius for showing hospitality to the Elder's representatives.

### Summary of teachings in letters...

See 1<sup>st</sup> John 3.23 > two principal themes of the letters are touched on in this verse: (a) believe in Jesus; and (b) love one another. Christology and ethics are dominant themes in the letters.<sup>13</sup>

The heretics apparently believed in the divinity of Jesus but rejected his humanity.

When the church split happened, the command to love another took on a new level of urgency and difficulty.

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 5.

<sup>12</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas F. Johnson, *New International Biblical Commentary, 1, 2, and 3 John* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 14.