



The Epistles Of John

Central Teaching Preview

Author

Tradition holds that the author of these three letters is the apostle John. This would expand his works to include the Gospel of John and the Revelation, bringing his total to five books. One of the common reasons given for his authorship of these letters is the somewhat uncanny similarities between 1 John and the Gospel of John. This is so consistent in church history that there has actually never been another potential author offered in the known writings of the early and late church fathers.

To quote Daniel Akin,

"Evidence both internal and external favors the view that the apostle John is the author of the three letters Christian tradition has attributed to him. The writing style is so close to that of the Fourth Gospel that common authorship clearly is the best position to affirm. The verdict of the early church was unanimous in its affirmation of John the apostle as author of the Fourth Gospel. The epistles of 2 and 3 John are obviously from the same pen as the author of 1 John. The author of that book claims to be an eyewitness (1 John 1:1–3). He writes with apostolic authority. Internal evidence suggests the author is now an aged man (cf. 1 John 2:1, 28; 3:7; 2 John 1; 3 John 1), which is in harmony with the early church tradition that John was advanced in years when he wrote. This evidence is more than sufficient to withstand those who would seek authorship of these letters or elsewhere."¹

Audience | Date

Most commentators date the writing of these epistles to sometime between 60-70 AD. It is commonly held that that is was written sometime around the writing of the Gospel of John. A

¹ Akin, Daniel L, *New American Commentary*

key consideration in this dating is the reference of 2:19 with regard to false teachers who had come out of the church in Jerusalem. This aligns with events of the revolt of the Judean churches around 66-70 AD that coincided with the Jewish revolt from the Romans.

The theme of false teaching that is heavy within these letters, along with the dating of it, suggests that the audience for this letter would have initially been the Judean churches of John's personal involvement, but also corporately intended for all the churches in the broader region. John's reference to himself as the "elder" suggests the responsibility of his apostleship over all the churches at that point in time, considering specifically that he could have likely been the only apostle still alive and ministering.

Theme

As we look more closely at the style of writing, examining both its unique manner of weaving themes together and the example of the life of the Apostle, we are able to form a bit of a picture of the intent of the letters, the spirit with which they were written.

In the first four verses we see a basic summary of what appears to be intent of God, through John, in writing these letters. John seems to be clear that his overall intent is that they would share in joy as the broader family of God through the means of "fellowship". He presents an ideal of sorts for life in God's family and the corresponding doctrine and principles that undergird that ideal. Lengthy descriptions and appeals to this "fellowship" are key if the broader family of God are to truly experience the joy that God intended for them.

We are choosing to summarize these central principles into one phrase, "Joyful Family Fellowship".

Doctrine

"Fellowship"

Of most significance in these epistles is the appeal of John for fellowship as the unifying quality of the spiritual life of God's family. To be as brief as possible here in terms of the doctrinal consideration, we must have a simple yet clear understanding of the intent of this word as developed through these letters. Much practical considerations will be made as we study the letters, but the doctrinal meaning of the word is quite simple. "Fellowship" is best understand as *relational closeness*. Some helpful synonyms are:

- Friendship
- Affection

- Harmony
- Intimacy

Interestingly enough, one of the primary synonyms in describing fellowship both in and out of Biblical examples, is the word love. This best encapsulates the intent of John in this letter. He wants to foster a deeper relational connection with God, opposing a merely performance or intellectually based christianity. He appeals to us to know and pursue the kind of interaction with God that is marked by true and deep, growing and fruitful friendship.

"Born Of God"

One issue of doctrinal significance is the use of the phrase "born of God" in these epistles. It appears five times in the letter (3:9, 4:7, 5:1, 5:4, 5:18), appearing to present drastic statements regarding the inability of the believer to sin or at least continue to sin (depending on the translation). This of course is highly problematic when synchronized with the other clear teaching of the New Testament on the Christian life.

Of essential importance is that we define this phrase in the immediate context of John's unique writing situation, considering his style, choice of wording, and even his personal tendencies. We cannot forget however, that our interpretation here must coincide with other significant writings on the topic, both by Paul and by Peter.

We will seek to build a case for understanding this phrase as the context seemingly implies - as a sanctification statement, descriptive of those who are already believers, who have received a genuine inward spiritual transformation. We will present a case that this phrase refers to the "inward man", the regenerate spirit of the believer in perfect union with the Holy Spirit. This does not imply that the believer has no sin, because he/she has and resides within the flesh. This description of John aligns with Paul's in Romans 7:18, "For I know that nothing good dwells in me, that is, in my flesh. For I have the desire to do what is right, but not the ability to carry it out."

To help in thinking through this distinction, consider Zane Hodges succinct commentary.

"In saying that the regenerate inward person (cf. Rom 7:22) keeps himself, John is not saying that one's inner self can somehow prevent all sin in the Christian life (cf. 1:5-10). What John means is that God's "seed remains in" the regenerate inner self (cf. 3:9) as the controlling element of his born-again nature and is impervious to even the slightest contamination from the wicked one. Believers' failures are due to the sinful "programming" of their earthly bodies, as Paul himself taught in Rom 7:7-25.

But try as he might, Satan cannot really touch the believer. But if a believer lets him, Satan will use his failures to lead him to further failures. So after every sin, a believer ought to rise from his confession to God, knowing that he is the same inwardly holy person he was before he failed!"²

Outline

SECTION 1: Joyful Family Fellowship

Date: January 15, 2023
Passages: Various
Topic: Context In The Larger Story

Date: January 22, 2023
Passages: 1 John 1:1-4
Topic: Closeness With God And His Family

SECTION 2: Foundations For Fellowship

Date: February 5, 2023
Passages: 1 John 1:5-2:2
Topic: Walking In The Light

Date: February 12, 2023
Passages: 1 John 2:3-14
Topic: Walking In Love

SECTION 3: Opposition To Fellowship

Date: February 19, 2023
Passages: 1 John 2:15-17
Topic: The World System

Date: February 26, 2023
Passages: 1 John 2:18-23
Topic: False Teaching

² Hodges, Zane, *Grace New Testament Commentary*

Date: March 5, 2023
Passages: 1 John 2:24-27
Topic: Abide As Your Defense

SECTION 4: Motivation For Fellowship

Date: March 12, 2023
Passages: 1 John 2:28
Topic: Being Eternally Aware

Date: March 19, 2023
Passages: 1 John 2:29-3:10
Topic: Being Righteous

Date: March 26, 2023
Passages: 1 John 3:11-23
Topic: Being Loving

Date: April 2, 2023
Passages: 1 John 3:24-4:6
Topic: Being Spirit Led

Date: April 16, 2023
Passages: 1 John 4:7-19
Topic: Being Motivated By The Father

SECTION 5: Demonstration Of Fellowship

Date: April 23, 2023
Passages: 1 John 4:20-5:2
Topic: Born To Love

Date: April 30, 2023
Passages: 1 John 5:3-21
Topic: Overcoming Through Love

SECTION 6: Examples Of Fellowship

Date: May 7, 2023
Passages: 2 John

Topic: Opposing False Teaching

Date: May 14, 2023

Passages: 3 John

Topic: Pursuing Joyful Family Fellowship