

1 2 3 John

By Dr. Alan Cobb

Author:

The first thing to note about these letters is that no author is identified by name, unlike when Paul wrote letters to churches and individuals. There is no good explanation for why this is, but because of this some modern scholars have attempted to show that the Apostle John is not the author and that perhaps there were several authors of these letters, the Gospel of John, and the Revelation. But the early church fathers, Clement of Rome (90 AD), Bishop Polycarp of Smyrna (110 – 140 AD), Justin Martyr (150 – 160 AD), Ignatius of Antioch (early 100s AD) Papias of Hierapolis (martyred about 155 AD), and Irenaeus of Lyons (130 – 202 AD) all quoted from 1 John and attributed it to the Apostle John. Other early writers, Origen, Dionysius, Eusebius, and Jerome all attributed all five writings to the Apostle John. The Muratorian canon, an early listing of the accepted writings for believers to read and from which to be taught recognizes the Apostle John as the author. So it seems prudent to follow the guidance of the early church fathers and especially Clement of Rome who lived at the same time as the Apostle John. Thus I believe all five writings were authored by the Apostle John before his death around 100 AD.

In addition to the early church fathers accepting 1 John as being written by the Apostle John there is internal evidence that the author was, or at least claims to have been, an eyewitness to the events of Jesus' life. The author presumes by his tone of writing to have authority to command obedience as only one of the original apostles and an eyewitness would have. And he addresses his audience as "little children" which indicates an aged individual who is readily known to his readers and who has a relationship with them. All of these support the position of the early church fathers that the Apostle John was the author.

With the assumption that the early church fathers were correct, the following is what is known about the life of the Apostle John. He and his younger brother, James, were sons of Zebedee who ran a fishing business on the Sea of Galilee. His mother, Salome, is mentioned by the gospel writers as being present at the crucifixion.

Many women were there, watching from a distance. They had followed Jesus from Galilee to care for his needs. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Joseph, and the mother of Zebedee's sons. – Matt 27:55-56

Some women were watching from a distance. Among them were Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James the younger and Joseph, and Salome. – Mark 15:40

The women who had come with Jesus from Galilee followed Joseph and saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. Then they went home and prepared spices and perfumes. But they rested on the Sabbath in obedience to the commandment. On the first day of the week, very early in the morning, the women took the spices they had prepared and went to the tomb. They found the stone rolled away from the tomb ... When they came back from the tomb, they told all these things to the Eleven and to all the others. It was Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the others with them who told this to the apostles. – Luke 23:55 – 24:2, 9-10

Near the cross of Jesus stood his mother, his mother's sister, Mary the wife of Clopas, and Mary of Magdala. – John 19:25

These references would indicate that Salome was Mary's sister and thus John and James were cousins of Jesus just as John the Baptist was (see Matt 1). John and James were fishing partners of Simon Peter and called along with Simon and his brother, Andrew, to be disciples (followers) of Jesus and eventually the first apostles. (Matt 4:18-22; Luke 5:1-11) John and James were referred to as "Boanerges" or "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17) because when their patience was pushed to its limit their anger erupted fierce and thunderous so that they spoke

like an untamed storm. Evidence of this was their desire to call down fire on a Samaritan town and being rebuked by Jesus. (Luke 9:51-56) While James was the first of the apostles to die a martyr's death (Acts 12:2), John lived to die of old age around 100 AD.

John, James and Peter were the only witnesses when Jesus raised the daughter of Jairus (Matt 9:18-26; Mark 5:21-43; Luke 8:40-56), when Jesus was transfigured on the mountain (Matt 17:1-8; Mark 9:2-8; Luke 9:28-36), and when Jesus went a distance from them to pray in the Garden of Gethsemane (Matt 26:36-39; Mark 14:32-35). John was sent with Peter to make preparations for Jesus to eat the Passover meal with his disciples. (Luke 22:7-14; Mark 14:12-17; Matt 26:17-20)

In his gospel account, John doesn't refer to himself by name, but only as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:20) According to tradition, John is the "other disciple" who followed Jesus as he was taken to the High Priest's courtyard, but only the "other disciple" was at first allowed to enter because he was known by the person on duty at the door. Peter was allowed to enter only when the "other disciple" came back to the door to bring him in. (John 18:15-16)

John is the only one of the Eleven disciples to be with Mary at the foot of the cross. As the eldest of Mary's children (she had other boys and at least one girl), Jesus commended his mother into John's care after his death. (John 19:25-27) John was with Peter when he healed the crippled man at the gate of the Temple. (Acts 3:1-11) John, along with Peter, were put in jail overnight and then questioned by the High Priest and Sanhedrin about this healing. (Acts 4:1-23) John and Peter were sent by the apostles to Samaria after they heard of many Samaritans responding to Philip's testimony and believing in Jesus. They laid their hands on the new believers and they received the Holy Spirit. (Acts 8:4-17)

Paul refers to John, along with Peter and James, as pillars of the church when he tells the Galatians about his visit to the council of apostles in Jerusalem who looked into his work reaching out to the Gentiles and leading them to believe in Jesus. (Gal 2:1-10; Acts 15)

Eusebius (early church historian) quotes Polycarp, Papias and Irenaeus (early church fathers) to say that John moved from Jerusalem to Ephesus and died there (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.* 4.18.6-8). Catholic and Orthodox tradition says he moved to Ephesus with Mary and that they both died there. Some other traditions say he moved after Mary died. The early church father, Tertullian, writes that the authorities tried to kill John by putting him in boiling oil, but he lived and therefore they banished him to the Island of Patmos. Eventually he was released and allowed to return to Ephesus where he lived until he died.

Justin Martyr (early Christian writer and apologist) in his *Dialogue with Trypho* (Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 81.4) referred to John as an eyewitness of Jesus' life who had lived "with us" at Ephesus. Irenaeus says John wrote his gospel account at while he lived at Ephesus (Irenaeus, *Adv. haer.* 3.1.1). Jerome says John was the teacher of Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis in Syria. It is also reported by Clement of Alexandria that John trained Polycarp, the future Bishop of Smyrna who was burned at the stake for his witness that Jesus is Lord and Savior of those who believe in him and trust his death.

Date

Though there is some disagreement among scholars as to the date of John's gospel and his letters, most agree that they were written in the latter part of the first century. The gospel may have been written first, because it appears to be written more to convince Gentile readers that Jesus is God while the letters are written more to believers to encourage and strengthen them to oppose the errant writings and teachings of those who claimed to be followers but had left the faith.

The gospel is thought by most scholars to have been written around 65 AD. The letters are thought to have been written after the Roman attack on Jerusalem and destruction of Temple in 70 AD. Thus the letters have a greater emphasis on end times than the gospel.

Intended Audience

The audience is not specified and thus some scholars have presumed that means it was intended for all believers to read. That seems unlikely since the author is addressing a specific problem caused by certain people straying from the teaching that had been given rather than general principles of living and because the author refers to the readers as “dear children” indicating a personal relationship with them. For these reasons and based on John living in Ephesus, it is likely that the audience is not the believers in Ephesus but believers in outlying cities where the false teachers had moved.

The False Teaching Being Countered

We know that John is writing to counter false teaching because he several times he writes “if we claim” and then he also writes “the man who says,” “whoever claim,” and “anyone who claims.” So obviously he is writing to counter those claims. From what John writes in this first letter we can learn the following thoughts that are being countered.

1. Jesus was not God incarnate (in the flesh). He was a human whom God inhabited from after his baptism until just before his death on the cross.
2. Jesus is not the centrality or most important factor in salvation. Knowledge, usually secret and only given to those who attain a particular standing, is what leads to salvation.
3. The Christian lifestyle is not the only way to live. A person doesn't have to follow just what Jesus taught but can add new knowledge that leads to other ways of living.

These are some of the basic tenants of the beginnings of Gnosticism which we will look at as we discuss the first four verses of Chapter 1.

The First Century World

The First Century way of thinking was a mixture of different religious thinking. The older Greek and Roman gods and goddesses were still followed but waning in importance. The mystery religions from other parts of the realm were gaining influence through their emphasis on a personal relationship with deity and the secret knowledge they professed would save a person. This secret knowledge would allow a person's soul to pass through the “aeons” (levels) up to God and result in salvation.

Philosophical thought, like the dualism of Plato (matter is evil and spiritual is good) still had a great influence on the way people lived. Secular materialism also had a major influence on life.

We see this same influence of mystery religions, dualism, and secular materialism greatly influencing our way of life today, especially the resurgence of Gnostic writings such as the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Judas, and the Acts of Paul and Thecla, all written in the 400s to 500s AD. Along with those Gnostic writings, many people are reading and following the Jewish Kabbalah which is said to open up followers to the secrets of the Old Testament and Rabbinic writings. The New Age thought being followed by so many people today is a mixture of current Eastern religions such as Hinduism, Confucianism, and Buddhism with Gnosticism, Kabbalism, and Wiccan.

1 John

Chapter 1

Verses 1 – 4. This is the purpose for writing. John begins by proclaiming that what he is writing is based on the truth that is from the beginning and what was heard, seen and touched personally concerning the Word of Life. He uses the collective “we” which could indicate he is including what the other apostles also heard, saw, and touched. In verse two he identifies that the Word of Life is the eternal life which was with the Father from

the beginning and that has appeared to us (mankind). Compare that with the beginning of his gospel:

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. . . . The Word became flesh and lived for a while among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:1-4, 14)

His wording, here and there, shows a common thread that connects him to the gospel account. He says “we” have proclaimed what was heard and seen so that they (audience) may have fellowship (a relationship) with us (believers and followers of Jesus) and join “our” fellowship with the Father and his Son, Jesus Christ (the Messiah). He says this will make “our” (his and other believers’) joy complete.

So his purpose is to reaffirm the truth that his audience has been taught so that they may continue to live according to it and thus have a relationship with other believers and the eternal, Triune God. This counters the false teaching that a person can have a relationship with God without a relationship with Jesus and that believers can continue in a close relationship with people who deny Jesus is God

This beginning statement begins an argument against the beginnings of the Gnostic movement that was arising but not yet firmly established as it becomes by 300 to 500 AD. There were two forms of this beginning Gnosticism – extreme and moderate. The extreme variety held that Jesus was not human at all but simply an extended appearance of the divine God. This follows the dualistic thought of Plato which divided the universe into spiritual and visible. It held that the spiritual was good and the material (visible) was evil. Thus the extreme variety denies the humanity of Jesus because all flesh is evil.

Moderate variety held that Jesus was the natural son of Joseph and Mary and had Messiahship laid upon him by God at his baptism (John saw the Spirit of God descending upon Jesus like a dove and heard a voice from heaven say “This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.” – Matt 3:16-17) and left him before his death on the cross. Thus Jesus was human and only appeared to be divine while the divine nature remained with him.

Gnosticism, as later developed, claimed that to attain salvation (freedom from the evil, material universe) a person had to have secret knowledge of God that only is attained by knowing the secret things they could teach about the divine God and how to receive his Spirit.

Verses 5 -10. Verse 5 provides the basis for the entire letter. The message heard from him is what Jesus taught the apostles during three years walking with them and especially in the forty days after his resurrection. The message is that God is light and there is not any darkness in him. This is not a description of a physical condition but a spiritual one. It is a claim that John learned as an eyewitness of Jesus’ ministry that Jesus is God and lived pure and without sin. Pure and sinless are characteristics of God – no darkness in him. John continues to say that if we claim to have fellowship with God (Jesus) but walk in the darkness we are lying and not walking in truth because light (God) cannot fellowship with darkness. But if we walk in the light like him then we can have fellowship with one another and Jesus’ shed blood purifies us from all sin. Then he says if we claim that we don’t have sin we are deceiving ourselves and again the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, he (Jesus) forgives the sins and purifies us from every unrighteousness. Again, John says if we claim we have not sinned then we make God a liar (because he says all have sinned) and therefore his word has not place in our lives.

All of these “if . . . then” statements counter the false idea that we can disobey God’s way for us to live and still have a right relationship (fellowship) with him. And since we all disobey, we need to confess our disobedience and have it forgiven so we can have fellowship with God and with other followers.

Chapter 2

Verses 1 – 2. John has just finished proclaiming that we have all sinned because we walk in the darkness and do not live in the light of truth. If we claim that we haven't sinned then we make God a liar and truth is not in us. So what would his readers normal conclusion be? If sin is inevitable, then what is the use of striving against it? Or since he wrote that if we confess our sin he (Jesus) is faithful and will forgive them and purify us. So, if forgiveness is that easy, why fear sinning? Here John begins to counter those ideas. "My dear children" isn't intended to mean John is writing to those he has directly led to believe in Jesus and become followers. The Greek word translated as "my dear children" is *teknia*, which is a family term of endearment. John is addressing his readers as an older, wiser follower (and especially the last living apostle) writing to believers who may have problems because of the wrong teaching that is being put out by people who have formerly worshipped with John and maybe with them. So he say he is writing this to them so that they might not sin. That doesn't mean they will never sin again because we know that everybody can and will fall into temptation and end up sinning again before they die. As Paul has previously written to the Corinthians, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!" (1 Cor 10:12) Every mature believer knows that temptation continues to attack believers and everyone is in danger of yielding to some temptation and falling from their close fellowship with Jesus. And that fellowship is what John wants to help his readers maintain. (See 1:3) When he writes "but if" it is really a recognition of that great possibility of our sinning. And he reminds us that we have an advocate or one who speaks in our defense. The Greek here is *paraclete*. A *paraclete* was an individual who came along side of someone to help them. The early church identified the Holy Spirit as our *paraclete* based on John's writing of Jesus' words to the disciples in the upper room before he went to the cross to pay for their sin. He told them, "All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor (*paraclete*), the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you." (John 14:25-26) Jesus also told them, "Unless I go away, the Counselor (*paraclete*) will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you. When he comes he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment: in regard to sin, because men do not believe in me; in regard to righteousness, because I am going to the Father, where you can see me no longer; and in regard to judgment, because the prince of this world now stands condemned." (John 16:7-11) Since the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are one in the same, it can be said that God is our judge, defense attorney, and the guarantor of our righteous standing when being judged. John proclaims that "he" (Jesus) is the atoning sacrifice (only acceptable payment) for our sins and for the entire world (everyone).

Verses 3 – 6. Now John gives his readers a way to know (Gk word indicates experiential knowledge) that they have come to know Jesus. The practical way is to look at our obedience to his commands. If someone claims to know Jesus he also claims to be in fellowship with him because Jesus sends the Holy Spirit to indwell a believer (as he told his disciples in John 14) and thus seal his restored relationship with God. So anyone who claims to know Jesus is claiming that the Holy Spirit lives in him and if he does not obey Jesus' commands, then he is a liar and does not really have knowledge of Jesus because he doesn't live as Jesus lived. John's point is that the depth of our knowledge of Jesus is shown by our obedience to his commands. As John has previously said, that doesn't mean a believer won't occasionally stumble and fail in his obedience, but the Holy Spirit will convict a person who really knows Jesus of his failure and encourage him to confess that failure and return to obedience. So a true believer will not continue in a life of sin without feeling miserable.

Verses 7 – 11. The question would have arisen in his readers' minds about what commands did he mean. People naturally fall into the desire to have a list to follow because then we don't need to think about what we are doing. If it is on the list and we are doing it, we're OK. If it is not on the list then it doesn't matter whether we are doing it or not. John also wants his readers to know that he isn't giving them a new command but is reminding them of one they have had from the beginning. Some scholars believe John is referring to the command to "love one another" as Jesus said in John 14:34, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." Jesus goes on to say "All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." (John 14:35) Then in John 15:12, John writes that Jesus said, "My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." But the command to "love one another" was not new when Jesus

said it because God had told the Israelites in Lev 19:18 “love your neighbor as yourself.” But here John says the command is still new because the truth is seen in him (the Word, Jesus) and also in his readers (meaning those who have fellowship with Jesus by walking in his commands). He says it is new because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Then John refers back to the dualistic example of light and darkness where God is light and darkness is the absence of the light that is God. And he says, anyone who loves his brother lives in the light and anyone who hates his brother walks in darkness and doesn’t know where he is going because the darkness has blinded him. So, anyone who claims to have fellowship with Jesus but hates his brother is not living the example of Jesus.

John wrote in his gospel that Jesus told his disciples, “Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command.” (John 15:13-14) When asked by a scribe what the greatest commandment is Jesus replied, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. . . . And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.” (Matt 22:37-38; Mark 12:30-31) And Luke wrote that Jesus said, “Do to others as you would have them do to you. . . . But love your enemies, do good to them . . . then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.” (Luke 6:31, 35) Paul wrote to the Romans (5:8) “But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.” John wrote in his gospel, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (John 3:16) So Jesus’ example of love shown by being willing to die for your friends is not just dying for those who have already become friends but dying for those who are yet enemies so they may become friends and then live in that friendship by obeying his commands. The example of claiming to live in fellowship with God and yet hating his brother can point back to the story of Cain and Abel. Cain claimed to have fellowship with God by bringing him an offering but hated his brother because Abel’s offering was acceptable to God while his was not. So he went out and murdered his brother. That shows he walked in the darkness.

So anyone claiming to live in fellowship with God must walk in the light of God’s love and that means loving those who don’t love you. That is best done by telling them about Jesus and his love for them so they can respond to that love. In that way you show you love your brother (friend or enemy) just as God has loved all his creation from Adam and Eve and will until he decides to create a new heaven and earth in which he will live in perfect harmony with all those who have trusted Jesus’ death to give them a right relationship with him.

Verses 12 – 14. Now John reminds his readers of their standing before God and in the world since they have trusted Jesus’ death to give them a right relationship and fellowship with God. This encouragement is broken into two sections of three statements each in which he refers to “dear children,” “fathers,” and “young men.” Was John excluding women in his statements? Not likely. The best explanation is that he is addressing all believers as “dear children,” mature believers as “fathers,” and less mature believers as “young men.” The Greek word he uses which is translated “dear children” is *paidia*, which refers to children as learners. In these statements he says first, their sins have been forgiven. Second, they have known him who is from the beginning (God incarnate – “in the flesh”). Third, they have overcome the evil one (because they are trusting Jesus who overcame him). Fourth, they have known the Father. (Jesus said, “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.” – John 14:9) Fifth, the word of God lives in them. (God, the Holy Spirit, is given to every believer as a counselor to help them know God’s word.)

Verses 15 – 17. After encouraging his readers with their spiritual condition, John begins to write about the enemies they must resist by first reminding them of what they should already know. He does this in three pairs of statements that contrast the world’s way of living and God’s way.

In the New Testament the Greek word *cosmos*, which is translated as “world,” is used in three ways. First, it refers to the physical planet upon which we live as in Acts 17:24, “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth . . .” Second, it refers to human beings as in John 3:16, “For God so loved the world . . .”) Third, it refers to the culture or the way of living as influenced by Satan. This is the

way it is used here.

The first statement is not to love the world or anything of the world's way of living because that way of living is opposed to God's love. The "if" clause indicates that some believers may try to live like the world, but that means they are not following God's love. The second statement is that everything in the world (craving of sinful men, lust, and boasting [pride of life]) comes from the world's way of thinking (following Satan's desires) and not from God's way of living.

"Craving, lust, and boasting" are examples of the world's way of thinking and living and include every way that Satan tempts people to live opposite to God's way of living. "Cravings" appeals to the physical body and the desire to have physical needs met. That was Eve's first temptation that the fruit was good for food (Gen 2:6) and that was the temptation for Jesus to turn the stones into bread (Matt 4:3; Luke 4:3). "Lust" appeals to the soul (intellect) and the desire to have what is pleasing to look at. That was Eve's second temptation (Gen 2:6) and the temptation for Jesus to have all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor without doing God's will (Matt 4:8; Luke 4:6). "Boasting" appeals to the spirit and the desire for control and prestige. That was Eve's third temptation to attain wisdom (knowing good and evil – Gen 2:6) and the temptation for Jesus to have the angels at his command come and protect him (Matt 4:6; Luke 4:9-11). These are all the ways Satan tempts every person to live opposite to God's way for them to live.

The third statement is that the world's way of thinking and living (Satan's desires) will end, but anyone who lives according to God's way of living will live forever. John isn't saying that we can attain eternal life by obedience (works) but that we will have fellowship with God for eternity. (Remember John purpose for writing is that his readers will have fellowship with God and other believers. 1 John 1:3)

Verses 18 – 29. Now John is going to alert his readers to special deceptions (temptations) that they would need to defend themselves against in what he considered to be the "last hour." Again John is addressing his readers using *paidia* to emphasize their learning what he is writing. Jesus spoke of the destruction of the Temple as being a sign of the end of the age. (Matt 24:2; Mark 13:2; Luke 21:6) Luke also records that Jesus told his disciples when responding to their request for signs of the end of the age that Jerusalem will be trampled on by the Gentiles until the times of the Gentiles are fulfilled. John's readers would be aware of that saying and, with the destruction of the Temple and Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD, they would consider that they were living in the last days or hours before Jesus would return. They would recall Daniel's writing that "the Anointed One (Messiah) will be cut off and will have nothing (die). The people of the ruler who will come will destroy the city (Jerusalem) and the sanctuary (Temple). The end will come like a flood: War will continue until the end, and desolations have been decreed." (Dan 9:26) John goes on to write that they have heard that the antichrist is coming. This would be familiar to them not only from Daniel's writing but also from Paul's letter to the Thessalonians. (2 Thes 2:8-9) John will write more about this antichrist later in this letter and his second letter. Anyone who is against Christ and opposes people following how he taught to live is an "anti" Christ, but here John first writes that "the" antichrist is coming. That is an indication of a specific person, like Daniel wrote about who would break a seven year covenant of peace with the Jews at the mid-point by placing an abomination in the Temple. (Dan 9:27) So, although his readers have heard and would expect a specific person (antichrist) who would be the one spoken of by Daniel, John warns them that many antichrists have already come. Here he is indicating that anyone who opposes Christ is "anti" Christ. Any one of those who are "anti" Christ could potentially become the antichrist if the timing was correct for Jesus to return. But before that could occur, a temple would have to be rebuilt and a seven-year peace treaty made with the Jews so that he could break it at the mid-point by making a desolation in the temple. So John is warning his readers about antichrists and how to recognize them. The phrase "they went out from us" could indicate the false teachers (antichrists) were once part of the group of believers in Ephesus where John is living and teaching, but it probably indicates that they left the teachings of the Apostles who had walked with Jesus and started teaching their own ideas. That agrees with John calling them antichrists. So, John indicates that they are not true believers because their leaving the teachings of the Apostles for false ideas proves it.

John now reminds his readers that they have an anointing from the Holy One. That is a reminder that the Holy Spirit lives in them. Thus John doesn't write to them because they don't have the truth, but because they do have the truth and thus know that no lie comes from that truth. The Holy Spirit doesn't lead believers to follow something that is not the truth about God. Only the deceiver (Satan) who is the father of lies does that. One of the teachings of the false teachers was that they denied Jesus is the Christ (Messiah). The position of the early Gnostics that John is writing against was that everything material (of the physical universe) was bad (evil) so Jesus could not have been Emmanuel (God in the flesh). So, by John's logic, anyone is an antichrist who denies that Jesus is the promised Messiah that would restore people to the right relationship with God that everyone lost when Adam and Eve disobeyed in the Garden of Eden. John urges his readers remain faithful to the truth about Jesus that they have heard because if they do they will remain in the Son and in the Father and that means they have the eternal life that Jesus promised.

John is writing these things about those who are trying to lead his readers away from the truth. But they don't need him to write it because the Holy Spirit who remains in them will teach them about all things. So remain in him (follow what Jesus taught) so that when he appears (returns as he promised) we will not be ashamed (embarrassed) that we have not been faithful to his teachings. Since Jesus is righteous, everyone who does the right that he taught has the new birth about which Jesus told Nicodemus. (John 3:5) John is warning his readers about the danger the false teaching of those who denied that Jesus is the Messiah would cause to their fellowship with God. If they rejected the Son, they could not expect a relationship with the Father.

Chapter 3

Verses 1 – 10. Now John builds upon the relationship with God, the Father, that his readers would have learned from his and the other Apostles' teaching and writing. He exclaims how great God's love must be for us that he has given us the right to be called children of God. The Greek word John uses is *tekna* which specifically is neuter gender. The Greek word for the male child (son) is *huios* which he never uses about believers but reserves only for the relationship of Jesus to the Father. People who are not believers cannot understand the concept of being children of God. It is also a little difficult for believers, especially newer believers. And we can't fully understand what it means and what we will be until Jesus has returned for his bride (church) and given us new bodies. Then when he returns to earth (and us with him), we shall understand it better. But it will take us an eternity to plumb the depths of that relationship and, I think, never fully understand it. John says that what we do know is that when Jesus returns (as he mentioned just a few verses previously) we shall be like him. John was the last living disciple that had seen Jesus in his resurrected body that was able to appear and disappear at his will, but still bore the marks of his crucifixion and could still eat food along with his disciples and be touched by them. So that indicates he considers that we will have glorified bodies like that.

John says that everyone who has this hope of a glorified body purifies themselves in Jesus just as he is pure and has no sin. But on the other hand, those who continue a life of sin (disobedience of the way Jesus taught to live) has neither seen him nor known him. So, John urges his readers not to let anyone lead them astray because it is only the person who does what is right who is righteous. The person who continues sinning is doing the work of Satan who has been sinning from the beginning. Jesus came to break Satan's work of leading people to sin. So everyone who has trusted the work of Jesus dying on the cross to give them a new, right relationship with God (new birth as Jesus said in John 3:3-8) cannot go on sinning because they have God's seed (Holy Spirit) in them and he would not lead them to sin (disobey God). In fact, the Holy Spirit will convict a person of their sin and try to lead them to confess so they will be restored to a right relationship with God. This is how a person knows that they are children of God and not children of Satan.

Then he concludes that anyone who does not do what is right and anyone who does not love his brother (fellow believer) is not a child of God. So the false teachers who deny Jesus cannot be believers and show it by their teaching and the lack of love for the believers whom they are deceiving.

Verses 11 – 24. John reminds his readers of what God has revealed from the beginning – that we should love one another. This isn't just Jesus' command to his disciples found in John 13:34 – 35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. All men will know that you are my disciples if you love one another." As Jesus told the scribe who asked him what the greatest commandment was, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and will all your soul and with all your mind. ... and the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." (Matt 22:37 – 40) One of the Ten Commandment is "you shall not commit murder. (Ex 20:13) Murder is not accidental killing. It is premeditated and shows hatred, not love. So murder is the opposite of love. Then John points out that the difference between and love and hate goes all the way back to Cain and Abel, children of Adam and Eve after their sin caused the death of their spirits, caused them to be evicted from the Garden of Eden, caused the Earth to be cursed with the second law of entropy (things move from order to disorder), and caused childbirth to be in pain. John points out that Cain murdered Abel because he hated that God accepted Abel's action as righteous while God didn't accept his. He warns his readers not to be surprised if the world hates them. The world (Satan's way of living) always hates anything or any person that points to God's way of living in love. He says that is a way we know we have passed from death to life – that we love our brother – and anyone who hates his brother is a murderer and doesn't have eternal life in him. Remember that this isn't referring to someone who kills another but not out of hatred. Even, David, a man after God's own heart, killed people and even had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah, killed, but not from hatred. (See 2 Sam 11 – 12)

Then John reminds us that the greatest example of love is Jesus laying down his life for those who were separated from God because they didn't believe and follow his commands. And John records in his gospel that Jesus told his disciples, "greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends." (John 15:13) Then John gives another example of knowing that we have love for our brother – anyone who has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity for him (indicating lack of action to help him) has to question if he has the love of God in him. John says love is not just with words but with actions. Love is actually an action verb and not a noun. So John says we can know we belong to the truth of God when our heart is at rest in his presence and doesn't condemn us. This would be the action of the Holy Spirit living in us that convicts us of disobedience and urges us to change our wrong actions. John reminds us that God is greater than our hearts and knows everything (the end from the beginning and even our very thoughts as we think them). So, if our heart doesn't condemn us then we know we can ask God for anything and receive it because we are asking in his will and because we are obeying his commands to believe in the name of Jesus and love one another. This, says John, is proof that God lives in us and we know it by the Spirit he gave us.

Chapter 4

Verses 1 – 6. Now, after telling his readers the Holy Spirit dwells within those who obey Jesus' commands, John wants them to be able to determine if they should listen to someone coming to them with a teaching. That's why he says to test the spirits. Some people think every spiritual manifestation is from the Holy Spirit. But John wants everyone to know that there are other spirits at work in the work besides the Holy Spirit and that they also can cause manifestations. They also promote Satan's way of living through the teaching of those who listen to and follow them. So John says to test the spirits – determine who is behind a person's actions and beliefs – God or Satan. He says this because there are false prophets (those who are anti-Christ, who have left the teaching of the Apostles) among his readers. Jesus also warned his followers about false prophets and said you can recognize them by their fruits. (Matt 7:15-23) This doesn't mean we should look at a person's works to determine if they are a false prophet.

Recently, I've heard several well-known preachers teach that it isn't what a person says they believe that saves them from their sin (gives them a right relationship with God) but whether they obey what Jesus taught. They are saying orthodoxy (ortho = right, doxy = thinking) isn't as important as orthopraxy (ortho – right, praxy = acting). But Jesus first said the false prophets come in sheep's clothing. So their works may look like they follow Jesus while they aren't true followers. According to Jesus they may even drive out demons and perform

miracles, but not be true believers and followers. And Jesus also said, “Make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit. You brood of vipers, how can you who are evil say anything good? For out of the overflow of the heart the mouth speaks. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in him, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in him. But I tell you that men will have to give account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned.” So Jesus says what you believe (orthodoxy), that which is stored in your heart, is more important than your actions (orthopraxy). John is also saying that belief is most important, but he says it in a different way.

John says you can recognize the spirit behind a person’s actions and beliefs by what they claim about Jesus. Those who acknowledge Jesus, the Messiah, has come in the flesh (orthodoxy) are from God and those who don’t acknowledge that are from the spirit of antichrist who is coming and is already in the world. John began his letter (chapter 1) indicating that Jesus is God in the flesh. He didn’t say it as forcefully as he did at the beginning of his gospel (chapter 1:1-4, 14) because he is writing to believers who have already acknowledged that, but only to remind them of what they have believed. So the spirit leading (guiding) anyone to say that Jesus is not God come in the flesh, cannot be from God because he doesn’t speak the truth. Then he reminds his readers that they have overcome the spirits who are anti-Christ because the one who is in his readers (Holy Spirit) is greater than those spirits who are anti-Christ (fallen angels following Satan). That is how we discern the Spirit of truth and the spirit of lies.

Putting this together with what John wrote in chapter 2 about obedience, we find that right belief (orthodoxy) should lead to obedience (orthopraxy). Combined they prove that a person has the Holy Spirit living in them and thus are guaranteed that they have a right relationship with God for eternity.

Verses 7 – 21. Now John turns from warning his readers about false teachers to loving each other. The Greek word which is sometimes translated as “dear friends” is *agapetoi* which is a plural form of the noun, *agape*, which refers to sacrificial love. Another way of translating this would be “beloved.” John returns now to the message he said in we have heard from the beginning (chapter 3:11) – that we should love one another. And he says, like he did in his gospel (John 3:16), that God showed his love among us by sending his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. So love is defined by God’s sacrificial gift of his only Son as an atonement (payment) for our sin (disobedience). That’s why we should love one another – because God first loved us. No one has seen God because to look upon his glory in our limited physical bodies would result in our destruction. John wrote in his gospel: “No one has ever seen God, but God the only Son, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” (John 1:18) And I’m sure he wrote that because of what he heard Jesus say, “No one has seen the Father except the one who is from God; only he has seen the Father.” (John 6:46) When Moses asked God to show him his glory, God said, “you cannot see my face for no one may see me and live.” But then God allowed him to look upon his back side as he walked by. (Ex 33:18 – 23) John says God’s love is made complete in our love of one another and thus it shows God’s love to the world.

We know God lives in us because he has given us his Spirit and those individuals are witnesses to the world that God has sent his son (Jesus) to be the Savior of the world. So, anyone who acknowledges that Jesus is God has God living in him and therefore also lives in God. Thus our belief rests in the love of God and gives us confidence that on the day of judgment we shall be like God (righteous and pure). Fear has no part of love because fear has to do with punishment but love comes from the unmerited favor of God given to everyone who believes that Jesus’ death has paid for their disobedience so they can live a right relationship with God with the Holy Spirit living in them. Here John says no one can hate his brother (whom he can see) and still love God (whom he can’t see). So God’s command is “if you really love me, you must love your brother.”

Chapter 5

Verses 1 – 12. Now John gives a clear definition of a Christian and what a person does to have a right relationship with God – believe that Jesus is the Messiah, born of God (Son of God which also means God in

the flesh as his readers would have known from the writings of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and Paul). Everyone who loves God has to love his Son (especially since Jesus is God in the flesh). So we can know that we love the children of God (other believers = the Church) because we love God and obey his commands. And as John has earlier, God's command from the beginning is that we love our brother. Love for God is not how you feel about God but how you relate to his children – other believers. Then John tells us that everyone born of God (those who believe Jesus is the Messiah – God come in the flesh and obey his commands) overcomes the world (has authority and power to live according to God's commands). Everyone who is born of God has the Holy Spirit living in them as John wrote in his gospel that Jesus explained to his disciples before his death on the cross. (See John 14 – 16) The victory that overcomes the world (Satan's way of living in opposition to God) is our faith (belief that Jesus is the Messiah – God come in the flesh). So who can overcome the world's way of thinking and living? Only the person who believes that Jesus is the Son of God can overcome the world. No one else has the power or authority because they don't have the Holy Spirit living in them providing it.

John says that Jesus is the one who came by water and blood. The early (pre-gnostic) teachers like Cerinthus taught that divinity came upon Jesus (remember the dove John the Baptist said he saw come down and rest on Jesus after his baptism) and left him before his crucifixion. (They can point to nothing that happened before his death that was like the dove to give any reason for their belief.) Our best understanding of Cerinthus' teaching about the Christ (Messiah) is that it is a divine spirit that came upon the human Jesus. That is what is behind the thought of more modern Gnostics and New Agers who claim that anyone can have the Christ come upon them and thus they can do miracles like Jesus did. John opposes this idea by saying Jesus came by water and blood and that it is the Spirit (God's Spirit), the Spirit of truth, who testifies to this. John says there are three who testify: the Spirit, the water, and the blood. The Spirit refers not only to the Holy Spirit coming upon Jesus at his baptism, but also speaking through the teachings of the Apostles who walked with Jesus. That was part of the work Jesus said the Holy Spirit (Comforter he described in John 14 – 16) would do. The water speaks of Jesus' baptism when not only did John the Baptist see a dove representing the Holy Spirit descend upon Jesus but also heard the voice of God say, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. (Matt 3:17) The blood speaks of Jesus' crucifixion and his blood, the perfect sacrifice, which was poured out for the forgiveness of sin. (Matt 26:28; Mark 24:24; Luke 22:20; Rom 3:25; Rom 5:9; 1 Cor 11:25; Eph 1:7; Heb 9:7-22) John reminds us that we accept man's testimony. In fact, by the law of the day, a fact could be established by the witness of two or three men. In the case of Jesus, we have the testimony of more than three who witnessed the life and miracles of Jesus. But John proclaims that God's testimony is higher than man's and that God has testified that Jesus is his Son and the Messiah. God did that at his birth, on the mount of transfiguration, and more importantly, by giving eternal life with himself to those who believe in Jesus and trust his death to give them a right relationship with him. John wrote in his gospel, "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) Here John writes that anyone who has the Son has life and anyone who does not have the Son does not have life.

Verses 13 – 21. Now John concludes his letter saying that he wrote these things to those who believe in the name of the Son of God so that they may know (not doubt) that they have eternal life. Then he says that this gives us assurance in approaching God, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us, and if he hears us he will answer. Now, since he is warning them about people who claim to be bringing them a new teaching, but which is opposed to what has already been taught, he gives them instructions about praying for those living in sin (which would be those giving false teaching). If anyone sees a brother commit a sin, one that does not lead to death, he should pray to God about that. He makes sure they know that all sin is wrong, but not all sin leads to death, so they should pray for fellow believers who are struggling with sin that does not lead to death.

John reminds us that anyone born of God does not continue to sin (that is they don't continue to live a life of disobedience to God's commands). That doesn't mean a believer won't struggle with, and even stumble over, some sin from time to time. Remember John has already written that "if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense – Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." He also wrote "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness." (1 John 1:9; 2:1) John acknowledges that the whole world is under the control of the evil one (Satan), but that the Son of God has

come and given us understanding so that we may know him who is true - Jesus, the Messiah – because he is the true God and eternal life.

Then he ends with a warning to keep ourselves from idols. Idols would be anything in our life that becomes more important than our right relationship with God which is maintained by faith and obedience.

2 John

Verses 1 – 3. This appears to be a personal letter, unlike 1 John which was more of a general writing of instruction and admonition to the believers in surrounding churches. The author only identifies himself as “the elder.” This has led some people to doubt that the Apostle John is the author, but the early church accepted it as being from the apostle. Scholars have determined that it was a common practice in the first century for a writing that was intended for public reading to have a statement on the outside of the scroll identifying the author. If this were actually a private correspondence for an individual, the identity of the author (although a scribe may have done the writing) would have been made clear at the beginning of the letter. A counter claim to this by some people is that John was well known and respected as “the elder” (last living person to have walked with Jesus) so that the opening address clearly identifies him, especially to those with whom he had a close personal relationship, without a more formal introduction.

The recipient of this writing is identified as “the elect lady and her children.” Some scholars in the past have tried to take the Greek words translated “elect lady” (eklekte kuria) and say that it is really a name – Eklekta. This is probably not correct since in the last line (verse 13) her sister is also called “elect.” Another possibility is that “the elect lady” is not an individual but a church and her children are the members. This would mean the “elect” sister in verse 13 would possibly be the church at Ephesus. I believe this is the better view and that the letter was intended to be read to the members at a public gathering of the believers.

John says he loves them in the truth and also all who know the truth, because the truth lives in us and will forever. He is using the “truth” to refer to Jesus just as he referred to himself in John 14:6, “I am the way and the truth and the life.”

Then John writes a blessing upon them. Grace – unmerited favor, mercy – forgiveness rather than justice, and peace – restored relationship with God. The blessing is from God, the Father, and Jesus, the Son, and John asks that it will be with them in truth and love. Jesus is truth (John 14:6) and God is love (1 John 4:8 & 16).

Verses 4 – 6. John is joyous that some of the believers in that church are walking in the truth. That means they are following Jesus’ commands. And now he says what he is writing them is not a new command but one they have heard from the beginning. Remember from 1 John that the command is to love your brother. (1 John 2:7, 9; 4:19-21) And love is defined as walking in obedience to God’s commands. So, the command is to walk in love.

Verses 7 – 11. In the first six verses, John has introduced the letter and commended his readers / hearers for the way they have been keeping the command to love their brother. Now John begins to turn to discussing the reason for his letter. Just like in 1 John, he wants to warn them about false teachers which he calls deceivers. He tells them they can recognize false teachers because they do not acknowledge that Jesus has come in the flesh. That was the view / teaching of deceivers like Cerinthus who claimed Messiahship (divinity) came upon Jesus at his baptism and left him before he died on the cross. Their teaching evolved from their belief that matter (anything physical) was evil / bad and that divinity (spiritual) was good and that good and evil cannot exist in the same person. So Jesus could not be God in the flesh, but could only have divinity laid upon him for a time. That is the basic idea of many New Age teachings that you can become god, and it originated in the Garden of Eden when Satan told Eve that by eating the forbidden fruit (disobeying God’s command) she and Adam could become like God knowing good and evil. (Gen 3:5) John says anyone who does not acknowledge

Jesus is God in the flesh and teaches such false ideas is “anti” Christ (against Christ) and a deceiver.

When he tells them to watch out that they don’t lose what they have worked for, he is not talking about salvation but about their close, loving fellowship with other believers. Their reward is not salvation, but a close-knit community that loves each other and obeys God’s commands. Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue (abide) in the teaching of Christ (seeks after such false teaching rather than the genuine teaching of the Apostles) does not have God. Remember that John wrote Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you really knew me, you would know my Father as well. From now on, you do know him and have seen him.” (John 14:6 – 7) And he also said “Don’t you believe that I am in the Father, and that the Father is in me?” (John 14:10) And “I and the Father are one.” (John 10:30) And “If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him and we will come to him and make out home with him.” (John 14:23) And “I will ask the Father and he will give you another Counselor to be with you forever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16 – 17) So, if anyone comes to them teaching that Jesus is not God in the flesh they cannot have God (the Holy Spirit) in them. John admonishes his readers / hearers not to take such a teacher into their house or welcome them because in doing such they share in his wicked work. It was common for traveling teachers to go from place to place and they would stay with those being taught and even receive food, clothing, and money for their teaching ministry. John says don’t take them in and give them assistance (that would include verbal recognition / encouragement). Doing so will lead to division among the believers. Some will recognize the teaching as error and reject it while others will be deceived and accept it and thus cause division.

Verses 12 – 13. John says he has much more that he could write but doesn’t want to use paper and ink. Instead he hopes he can visit and talk with them face to face. That would make his and their joy complete to share the truth about Jesus in loving fellowship. Then he closes with greetings from their fellow believers in their sister church (probably Ephesus where John is living).

3 John

Verse 1. Like 2 John, this is in the form of a letter, but this one identifies the recipient by name. Again, the author only identifies himself as “The elder” and this is probably because he was so well known by this friendly relational term. The recipient was well known by John because he calls him “beloved,” which is a translation of the Greek word “agapeto.” Each section of this letter begins with this word. Gaius was a common Greek name in the first century so it could be anyone. There is no evidence in this letter or the writings of early church leaders to connect this Gaius with Paul’s Macedonian companion (Acts 19:29) or his companion from Derbe (Acts 20:4) or the one he baptized and who hosted the church in Corinth (1 Cor 1:14 and Rom 16:23). What we can predict is that he was most probably a Gentile convert who lived in the area somewhere near Ephesus and that the letter was written near, if not at, the same time as first and second John.

Verses 2 – 4. John begins with a prayer that his friend, Gaius, will continue to have good health and that everything will go well with him just as his soul is doing well. John knows about Gaius’ health and his faithfulness to the truth taught by Jesus because of the reports of traveling believers who have been with him. Remember what John has written in first and second John: he encouraged believers to love their brothers (1 John 3:11, 14-18; 4:20-21; 2 John 5) and he warned them not to believe or provide support to people who bring false teaching or oppose the truth taught by the Apostles (1 John 2:18-23; 4:1-3; 2 John 7-11). The report John has received about Gaius is that the way he lives shows that he is walking according to the truth.

Verses 5 – 8. Then John commends Gaius for how he is taking care of the believers who have come to their area teaching the truths taught by Jesus and the Apostles. Believers traveling from town to town teaching the

truth needed help from fellow believers in those towns because they had no other source to provide for their daily needs. Early believers who felt called by the Holy Spirit (like Paul and Barnabas) to go to other towns and share about Jesus (the Name) left their families, friends and normal work and trusted that God would provide for their needs. This is still much the way people feel called to be missionaries and leave their families and friends, trusting God to provide for their needs while they are ministering in Jesus' name. This is the way Jesus sent out his disciples into the towns (Matt 10:5-14; Mark 6:7-11; Luke 9:1-5; 10:1, 4-11). John agrees with what Gaius is doing to help those believers in their ministry and encourages him to continue.

Verses 9 – 10. Now, John calls out a member (probably the leader) of the believers where Gaius lives. He calls him by name, Diotrephes. John says he wrote to the church but Diotrephes would have nothing to do with “us” (probably meaning himself and those who teach the truth). Since we don't have any other letters John wrote to churches or individuals, most scholars think the letter that John mentions is 2 John and that Diotrephes refused to let it be read to or by the church under his leadership. So John has sent this letter to Gaius, commending him and indicating he would be coming in person to confront Diotrephes face-to-face. Diotrephes likes being the leader and in charge and doesn't want others to come and speak to the people about Jesus. By doing this he is showing that he is not led by the Holy Spirit, but by the spirit of jealousy / pride (which is evil).

Verses 11 – 12. John encourages Gaius not to imitate the evil of Diotrephes, but to do what is good (like he has already commended him for doing). Then John says that Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone, even by the truth itself. It appears that Demetrius carried this letter to Gaius. Some people may wonder if this Demetrius is the same one who was a silversmith in Ephesus and brought trouble against Paul (Acts 19:23-41). This event occurred in the early 50s AD and John is writing this letter between 65 to 69 AD. So, it is possible that this is the same individual who has believed and become an ardent follower of Jesus because of Paul's witness.

Verses 13 – 14. As in his previous letter, John says he has much more to write but doesn't want to use paper. Instead, he hopes to meet Gaius and talk with him face-to-face. Then John closes with a prayer for peace and says the friends (believers) where John is also send their greetings. And John asks Gaius to greet the believers there by name.