

THE  
DISCIPLESHIP  
PLACE

Telling the New Testament  
Story of God



**SESSION 17**

1, 2, and 3 John

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# 1, 2, and 3 John

## SESSION OVERVIEW

**Letters of 1, 2, and 3 John**

**The Johannine Epistles and the Fourth Gospel**

**Application**

**Exam**

**Discussion Guide for Mentor and Participant**

## LEARNER OBJECTIVES

At the end of this session, you should:

- gain an understanding of the types of letters written in the first century.
- know the purpose and main content for the Johannine Letters, 1, 2, and 3 John.

# 1, 2, and 3 John

## INTRODUCTION



The Johannine epistles of 1, 2, and 3 John are among the catholic or general epistles. Originally, 1, 2, and 3 John like other New Testament writings bore no name. Names were added in the late second century based on traditions in the Church. This treatment of authorship seems strange to us, because we are much concerned with authorship. In the ancient world, however, the ideas contained within a document were of utmost interest. Another distinguishing feature of the ancient world was the differentiation between the author and writer of a work. A work was considered authored by an individual if the work reflected the thoughts or beliefs of that person, regardless of who did the actual writing. As was the case with the other general epistles (James, 1 and 2 Peter and Jude), the content of these letters is quite diverse.

## LETTERS OF 1, 2, AND 3 JOHN

### NOTES

The first two letters were written to congregations and the third letter was written to an individual, who was probably part of one of the congregations in Asia Minor. They are written in very simple and clear Greek and express the concern of an aging pastor for his people.

### WHO?

#### *Author:*

- Traditional position. The Apostle John (who grew up in Galilee, probably in Bethsaida). His father was Zebedee and his mother was Salome, who accompanied Jesus and His disciples on their journeys. His brother was James. John was a disciple of John the Baptist and after John's arrest was called by Jesus to be His disciple. He knew the high priest, took care of Jesus' mother, Mary, and was one of the first men to see the empty tomb. He ministered in Jerusalem from AD 30 to 68 and in Ephesus from AD 68 to 98 when he died. Part of this time, he was on the Island of Patmos in exile.
- Textual evidence. No identification of author in 1 John. The author calls himself an elder in 2 and 3 John. While few scholars today believe that the Johannine writings (the Gospel of John or the Fourth Gospel, 1, 2, 3 John, and the Revelation) derive from one author, some recognize the similarities among these writings and view them as belonging to a Johannine school or as in some way being associated with a school of thought and belief ultimately deriving from the apostle John. Concerning the Johannine epistles, a common understanding attributes 1 John to one author and 2 and 3 John to another. There are significant reasons for seeing a common author or at least a strong connection between the Fourth Gospel and 1 John. These reasons relate to content, vocabulary, and structure (see the comparison of the Fourth Gospel and the Johannine Epistles).

#### *Audience:*

- 1 John: "My children," believers—children, parents, young people
- 2 John: "The elect mistress or lady (*eklekte kuria*) and her children." Some interpret this to refer to a Church patroness or woman pastor and those who met in her house for church. Others see the phrase as a personification of the local church, since the word church in Greek is feminine.


**NOTES**

- 3 John: “Gaius,” convert of John who had the gift of hospitality and with whom John plans to stay.

**WHERE?**

*Author:* John from Ephesus in Asia Minor, most likely

*Audience:* Unknown, but probably in Asia Minor

**WHEN?**

Somewhere between AD 68 and 98, but probably in the 90s

**WHAT?**

*1 John.* The themes of 1 John include right belief and right living. These both directly confront the incipient Gnostic teachings apparently trying to take over in the church(es) which John was addressing. There are many questions concerning Gnosticism. A primary question is whether it was a pre-Christian religion or a post-Christian heresy. Most scholars presently see it as not becoming fully defined until the second century AD. Thus, in terms of New Testament influence, they speak of incipient Gnosticism (a system of thought still under development). In any event, by the second century, it was a widespread movement (incorporating “a constellation of religious phenomena” as described by R. M. Grant) in the Greco-Roman world and made itself known among some Christians. The chief source of information about this movement is a library of 52 books discovered near Nag Hammadi in upper Egypt in 1945-46.

What is Gnosticism? The term derives from the Greek word for knowledge, namely *gnosis*. The Gnostics claimed to have a special knowledge. They were gnostics or knowers, people of understanding. This *gnosis* (special knowledge) had a liberating and redeeming effect. It was given by revelation only to the elect who were capable of receiving it.

The Church Fathers compared Gnostic teaching to the many-headed hydra of Greek legend. In other words, it was hard to pin down what the Gnostics believed. There was no Gnostic church or normative theology, no Gnostic rule of faith, and no dogmas of exclusive importance. Gnostic systems attached themselves to host religions, so they did not have their own tradition, sacred books or stories, but borrowed ones from the host religion or a mixture of host religious ideas.


**NOTES**

The essential features of Gnosticism consist of the following:

- Gnostics believed in dualism on the cosmological (dealing with the nature and structure of the universe) and anthropological levels (dealing with the nature of humanity) and that there are good and evil gods/goddesses or heavenly beings as well as good and evil people. Good and evil forces or beings tend to be of equal strength in pure dualism, so the question of who wins in the end is still to be determined.
- Basically, matter was viewed as evil and spirit as good. Therefore, the physical world was viewed as being evil. The world creator or Demiurge was sometimes identified with the God of the Old Testament. We are not surprised, therefore, in the rejection of the Old Testament by the Gnostics.
- In each person there is a divine spark that comes from the divine world and has to be awakened. For some people this is very easy to do, because the spark glows brighter; for others it takes more effort.
- Angels and other heavenly beings played an important role in the creation of the world, and they explain why things are the way they are.
- Soteriology. The human situation was that of having a divine spirit trapped in a physical body. Salvation involves the human spirit becoming free from the prison house of the body, and this occurs through *gnosis* or knowledge. God/god/goddess and his/her helpers open up a way in which the soul can escape to heaven. This is where the special knowledge comes in. Those with special knowledge know how to get the God/god/goddess and his/her helpers to reveal the things that are difficult to interpret and the things that are secret. In some Gnostic thought, *gnosis* comes through a revelation from a divine redeemer who descends from the spiritual realm bringing *gnosis*. This *gnosis* teaches humanity about its divine origin. The knowledge of our heavenly origin is a precondition for our salvation. For Christian gnostics, this divine redeemer is Jesus Christ.

### *Docetism*

In accordance with Gnostic thought, Jesus only seemed to be human. In actuality, he was a phantomlike creature. This view of Jesus is docetic. Docetism comes from the Greek word *dokeo* that means to seem. This belief presents the problem that if Jesus was not human, then He was not the Messiah (Christ), since by definition the Messiah was an anointed human being, and He was not the Son of God, but God himself.


**NOTES**

Greek thinking found it very difficult to understand how a truly human person could reveal the character of God. Contrary to Old Testament Jewish teaching, they believed the human world was quite separate from the heavenly world, and, as indicated above, the goal of every human soul was to escape this world (or the body) for life in the supernatural world. The religious and philosophical issue Docetism tried to solve was how an all-powerful God could be imprisoned in a human being. Since this was thought to be impossible, Jesus must have only seemed to have been human.

One of the prominent Docetists who lived at the same time as John (according to Irenaeus in *Against Heresies* 3.3.4) was Cerinthus. Irenaeus tells us the apostle John went to a public bathhouse in Ephesus, but refused to take a bath because Cerinthus was there. Some have suggested 1 John was written in reply to Cerinthus himself. A docetic view of Jesus was clearly rejected by the early Christian church as given voice in later creedal statements such as the Apostles' and Nicene Creeds. These creedal statements affirm the full humanity and divinity of Jesus Christ. Some scholars see John as contrasting the false teachings of incipient Gnosticism with Christian belief:

**Incipient Gnosticism****Christianity***Wrong Belief**Right Belief*

1:6: Believes a lie

2:20-23: Believes the truth

4:6: Spirit of falsehood

4:6: Spirit of truth

2:22-23-4:3: Denies Jesus

4:2: Confesses Jesus

1:10: Denies sin

1:9-2:1: Accepts forgiveness

*Excuses Sin: A Sinning Religion**Victorious Christian Living*

1:6: Walks in darkness

1:7: Walks in the light

2:19: Division comes from the spirit of the anti-Christ

1:9: Has fellowship with God and others

2:4: Disobeys Christ

2:3, 17: Obeys Christ and does God's will

3:8: Sins continually

3:4-6: Freedom from sinning

5:19: Under the control of the devil

3:9-10, 4:4, 5:4-5: Has God's victory by faith


**NOTES**

*2 John*. This letter was written to the chosen lady which is an unusual Greek term for the New Testament, *kuria*, or the feminine form of *kurios*, which is translated, lord, master, or sir. This letter is only one chapter long and is really an announcement that John wants to come and visit. He wants to explain his position and reinforce the truth. His two main commands are to love one another and to watch out for the deceivers who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh.

*3 John*. This letter was written to my dear friend Gaius. This short, one-chapter letter is also an announcement of John's desire to come for a visit. He commends Gaius for his hospitality to brothers who were strangers to Gaius. Following the tradition of a praise and blame letter, he praises the behavior of Gaius and Demetrius and blames or states his disapproval of Diotrephes' behavior.

### *Special Verses*

#### *1 John (on sin)*

1:7-8: "but if we walk in the light as he himself is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin (NRSV)"

2:1: ". . . so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous."

3:4-5: "Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. You know that he was revealed to take away sins, and in him there is no sin."

3:8-9: "Everyone who commits sin is a child of the devil; for the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The Son of God was revealed for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil. Those who have been born of God do not sin, because God's seed abides in them; they cannot sin because they have been born of God."

#### *1 John (on love)*

2:5: ". . . but whoever obeys his [Jesus'] word, truly in this person the love of God has reached perfection"

2:15: "Do not love the world or the things of the world. The love of the Father is not in those who love the world."

3:1: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are . . ."


**NOTES**

3:11: “For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another.”

3:14-18: “We know that we have passed from death to life because we love one another. Whoever does not love abides in death . . . We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us – and we ought to lay down our lives for one another. How does God’s love abide in anyone who has the world’s goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?”

3:23: “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.”

4:7-21: “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not love God, for God is love. God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him . . . No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us . . . God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them . . . There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear . . . We love because he first loved us . . . The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sister also.”

5:2-3: “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and keep his commandments . . . And his commandments are not burdensome.”

### 2 John (on love)

1:1: “The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth . . .”

1:3 “Grace, mercy, and peace be with us from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father’s Son, in truth and love.”

1:5-6: “. . . let us love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments . . .”

### 3 John (on love)

1:1: “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.”

## WHY?

The three letters of John were written late in the first century and to people who were probably facing Gnostic or pre-Gnostic teachings as well as Docetic teachings, which were surfacing in the church.

 **NOTES**

- *1 John*. So their joy might be full, so they will not sin, so that they will love one another, and to assure them of their victory in Christ. A stress on the humanity as well as deity of Christ is evident.
- *2 John*. Similar to 1 John, adds the concern about those who might deny either the humanity or deity of Christ.
- *3 John*. Gaius is commended for his hospitality to traveling Christian evangelists. The author discusses the vices of Diotrephes and the virtues of Demetrius.

## THE JOHANNINE EPISTLES AND THE FOURTH GOSPEL

### NOTES

While scholars continue to debate issues of authorship, there are strong reasons for seeing a connection between 1 John and the Fourth Gospel or Gospel of John. One area of support is the parallel structure between these two works. The prologues of both are unique in the New Testament. John 1:1-2 declares: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.” First John 1:1 states: “We declare to you what was from the beginning . . .” A reference to the term “beginning” is noticed in both works.

Another area of note concerns the stated purpose for writing in these documents as presented in John 20:31 and 1 John 5:13. John 20:31 reads: “But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” First John 5:13 states: “I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.”

There are significant differences, however, between the Gospel of John and 1 John. In part, these differences may relate to different life-settings for each work. With 1 John, the Johannine community has now completed a traumatic break with the synagogue and faces different adversaries who come from within and not outside the community. In this session, we have presented these persons in terms of incipient Gnosticism. In any event, as pointed out by Raymond Brown, some of the differences between the Gospel of John and 1 John are as follows:

- 1 John stresses Jesus’ humanity (4:2), while the Fourth Gospel places emphasis on His divinity (1:1).
- 1 John emphasizes the sacrificial and atoning nature of Jesus’ death (1:7, 3:16, 4:10), while the Fourth Gospel depicts Jesus’ death as His triumph and glorification (12:27-32).
- 1 John evidences the apocalyptic language and interests of *parousia* (second coming of Christ, 2:28, 3:2) and anti-Christ. Such language is absent in the Fourth Gospel.
- 1 John attributes important features to God rather than to Christ as in the Fourth Gospel. In John 1:4, 9 and 8:12, Jesus is light. In 1 John 1:5, God is light.
- 1 John contains no quotes from the Old Testament. The Gospel of John contains many references.

## APPLICATION



### NOTES

1. Read 1, 2, and 3 John in two different translations. Look for answers to the five hermeneutical questions Who, What, Where, When, and Why. How do your findings correspond with those presented in this session? Any new insights?
2. Read and explore how John deals with the ideas of Gnosticism and Docetism in the following passages: 1 John 2:22-23, 4:1-3, 15; 5:1-5, 10-12. Supplement your study by reading articles on Gnosticism and Docetism in Bible dictionaries, or Internet websites (Biblical Studies Foundation <http://www.netbible.com>; Blue Letter Bible <http://www.blueletterbible.org>; Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools <http://bible.crosswalk.com>). What key ideas have you learned from this study? What relevance do your findings have for the Church today?
3. First John 5:16-17 states: "If you see your brother or sister committing what is not a mortal sin, you will ask, and God will give life to such a one – to those whose sin is not mortal. There is a sin that is mortal; I do not say that you should pray about that. All wrongdoing is sin, but there is a sin that is not mortal (NRSV)." What are some questions that come to your mind? Explore these questions through the use of study Bibles, Bible dictionaries, or Internet websites (Biblical Studies Foundation <http://www.netbible.com>; Blue Letter Bible <http://www.blueletterbible.org>; Crosswalk.com Bible Study Tools <http://bible.crosswalk.com>). How are we to understand this passage? What is its significance for you and the Church at large?

## EXAM



### NOTES

1. In the ancient world, the author and writer of a document were always identified with one another.
  - A. True
  - B. False
2. Each of the Johannine epistles was written to address a specific circumstance in the one of the congregations in Asia Minor.
  - A. True
  - B. False
3. In \_\_\_\_\_, Gaius is commended for his hospitality to traveling Christian evangelists.
  - A. 1 John
  - B. 2 John
  - C. 3 John
  - D. Gospel of John
4. There appears to be a close connection between \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. 1 John and 2 John
  - B. 1 John and 3 John
  - C. 1 John and the Gospel of John
  - D. none of the Johannine writings
5. First John stresses Jesus' humanity, while the Fourth Gospel places emphasis on his divinity.
  - A. True
  - B. False
6. "For this is the message that you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another." This is the language of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - A. 1 John
  - B. 2 John
  - C. 3 John
  - D. Gospel of John
7. For the Greeks, the aim of religion was to ensure one's resurrection from the dead to enable participation in the supernatural world.
  - A. True
  - B. False

 **NOTES**

8. The words to “The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth” are found at the beginning of \_\_\_\_\_.
- A. 1 John
  - B. 2 John
  - C. 3 John
  - D. Gospel of John
9. The themes of \_\_\_\_\_ include right belief and right living.
- A. 1 John
  - B. 2 John
  - C. 3 John
  - D. Gospel of John
10. The words, “And this is his commandment, that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us” are found in \_\_\_\_\_ and are quite characteristic of this writing.
- A. 1 John
  - B. 2 John
  - C. 3 John
  - D. Gospel of John
11. In \_\_\_\_\_, Jesus’ death is depicted as his triumph and glorification.
- A. 1 John
  - B. 2 John
  - C. 3 John
  - D. Gospel of John
12. The language of the parousia (second coming of Christ) and anti-Christ are found in both 1 John and the Fourth Gospel.
- A. True
  - B. False
13. A docetic view of Jesus was generally embraced by the Early Christian Church, but was later overturned with a full affirmation of Jesus’ humanity and divinity.
- A. True
  - B. False
14. First John and the Gospel of John both include numerous references to the Old Testament.
- A. True
  - B. False

## DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR MENTOR AND PARTICIPANT

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**NOTES**

Be prepared to discuss the following with your mentor.

1. What do John's concerns tell us about the churches in Asia Minor at the end of the first century? What similarities do they have with 21st century churches? What differences?
2. First John places much emphasis on Christian love. How does he define love? How does love appear in terms of our relationship with God and with others in the community of Christ? How would the living out of John's understanding of love transform us, the Church, and the world?
3. In 1 John 2:8, John is writing about a new command, to love one another. Why is it new? Why is it not new?
4. Indicate one teaching relating to Gnosticism that you find to be of particular interest. Do you see evidence of this type of thought in the modern world? If so, explain.
5. The Docetists stressed the divinity of Christ, but did not allow for His true humanity. What is the outcome of an understanding such as this? What does it look like in the Church?
6. What thoughts or arguments have you gained from John that will be helpful to counter the false teachings you encounter?
7. What are some primary truths you have learned from this session?