



Introduction to 1-3 John

These letters are attributed to the disciple John, son of Zebedee and author of the Gospel of John and the book of Revelation. They were written to the church at Ephesus (where John lived) most likely after the gospel was recorded but before the Book of Revelation was given on Patmos (AD 85-95).

Early church fathers Polycarp (a disciple of John and early church martyr), Irenaus, and Clement all attributed the books of 1-3 John to John the apostle; only Papias assigned it to another Christian named John the Elder. Papias' conclusion was not accepted by the early church.

During the rise of German Liberalism in the mid-1800s (and through the work of a liberal scholar named Rudolph Bultmann), skepticism about John's gospel arose; it was treated as a "Gnostic" work that was less authoritative than the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark, and Luke). But when studying the nature of John's gospel alongside these letters, we quickly see that his work rejects the Gnostic idea that matter is evil and the spirit is superior to the body. John emphasizes "the Word made flesh"—the indwelling of God's Spirit in a man, a concept distasteful to Gnosticism. John wrote from a traditional Jewish perspective, albeit in fluent Greek.

According to commentator Earl Palmer, the style of John is similar to that of the Old Testament psalmists and wisdom writers. John uses parallelism and repeated words, phrases, and concepts to move the reader toward the intended conclusion. This is very different from Paul's Greek-influenced, syllogistic (logical) style we see in books like Romans and 1 Corinthians. John is not interested in creating a logical argument; he is perfectly content to repeat a concept every few paragraphs, each time with a slightly different angle.

There are several major themes in these letters, and you'll notice John focuses both on what he is *for*—the gospel and the person of Jesus—and what he is *against*—false teaching in the church.



1 John, Chapter 1

READ THE ENTIRE BOOK OF 1 JOHN

Take your first study day to read the entire book of 1 John. It won't take long—it's only five chapters!

Write down 4-5 themes you see in the text. A theme is indicated by repeated use of specific words (e.g. covenant, grace, love).

What themes did you find?

Re-read 1 John 1. We will turn our focus first to verses 1-4. In what four ways did John and the other apostles (referred to as "we") interact with the gospel? (v.1)

In what three ways did they (and John) interact with the “word of life”? (v. 2)

What is the origin of the word of life? (v. 2)

What did John and the apostles do with the word of life (v. 3) and why?

There are two kinds of fellowship mentioned (v. 3). Who is this fellowship with?

What is the reason for this letter? (v. 4)

Turn to the Gospel of John. Read John 1:1-5. What similarities do you see between that passage and this one? (If you have two Bibles or a Bible app and a physical Bible, it can be helpful to have them both open at the same time!)

Who is “the Word” in John 1?

In his commentary on the gospel of John, William MacDonald says: “John speaks of [Jesus] as the Word because God has fully expressed Himself in the person of the Lord Jesus. By coming into the world, Christ has revealed to us what God is like and by dying for us on the Cross of Calvary, he has told us how much God loves us. Thus Christ is God’s living word to man, the expression of God’s thoughts.”

John 1 is my favorite passage in the entire Bible. As a Latin student in high school I was tasked to translate this passage from Latin to English, and for some reason it impacted me greatly

to hear this powerful testimony in the language of our church fathers (after the Greek period):

In principio erat Verbum et Verbum erat apud Deum et Deus erat Verbum.

Hoc erat in principio apud Deum.

Omnia per ipsum facta sunt et sine ipso factum est nihil quod factum est.

In ipso vita erat et vita erat lux hominum.

Et lux in tenebris lucet et tenebrae eam non comprehenderunt.

“The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.” (ESV)

In the Gospel of John 1:5, the writer transitions from speaking about the Word to speaking about the Light. He follows a similar pattern in 1 John 1:5-10. Read the rest of the 1 John passage and circle every instance of light, darkness, truth, and sin.

Turn back to the Gospel of John and read 1:6-10. Write down everything John says about the Light:

Look at the Gospel of John 1:9. What does John call the Light?

In 1 John 1:5-7, the writer reaffirms that God is Light—“*in him is no darkness at all.*” John wasn’t making this up; Jesus testified to this in the Gospel of John 8:12. Look it up. What does Jesus say?

Let’s look a little closer at what ensues when Jesus makes this statement. Read John 8:13-19. What objection do the Pharisees (Jewish religious leaders) raise?

How does Jesus answer? (8:17)

Look back at the Gospel of John 1. In verses 6-8, how many times does John say 'witness'?

Now look at 1 John 1:1-3. Circle every instance of 'seen', 'heard', 'touched', 'testify', or 'proclaim'. How many times does he say these words?

Why do you think John emphasizes the idea of witness?

Read Acts 4:13-20. Take note of verse 20. What do John and Peter say?

Baker Illustrated Bible Commentary points out that this short verse, attributed to John and Peter, reflects a very Johannine thought. John says almost this exact phrase in both his gospel and his letters! Compare Acts 4:20 to 1 John 1:1-3.

Do you see the similarity? What does this say about John's authorship of the letter?

The concept of witness is very important. Early eyewitness accounts would confirm that a document was trustworthy and grant it authority. Jesus claimed that authority in Himself and the Father, and John builds on that by affirming that he and the apostles (and in the gospel of John, John the Baptist) were witnesses to the truth of who Jesus was. John recognized that the authenticity of Jesus was fundamental to his message. As Karl Barth said, "Show me your Christology and I will tell you who you are." Everything John is about to teach the church centers on the nature of Jesus.

John *really* wants his readers to understand who Jesus is and how following him results in changed lives.

The ideas of light and truth in the Old Testament were linked to righteous living. Think of Psalm 119:11. What does it say?

Here we see similar language to the prologue about Jesus in John 1! Look at the Gospel of John 1:1-3 again. What does the light of Jesus do?

Our life in Christ is a light that overcomes darkness (John 1:4-5). 1 John 1:6 says: *"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth."* John is about to answer some claims (most likely within the church he's writing to) about sinlessness and habitual sin.

Read 1 John 1:6-10. Why can't we be followers of Christ and habitual, unrepentant sinners at the same time?

Read 1 John 1:7. What does the light and blood of Jesus do for us?

John is very blunt in verse 8. What does he say?

How often do you sin against God's commands?

What is our hope in Christ when we sin? (v. 9)

What is the "trigger" for forgiveness of sins? (v. 9)

The word 'confess' is the Greek *homologeō*, meaning to agree or declare in unison with God. Earl Palmer writes: "We are told by John that our responsibility is to agree with God about the nature of our crises... How unlike the mysticism and religiosity of the first century and twentieth century are John's words. They are simple, direct, and real. Come into the light where Jesus Christ is; here you will meet yourself and here you will meet Him."

What does this forgiveness teach us about the character of God? (v. 9, two things)

How does it feel to know that through confession and repentance you are cleansed of all unrighteousness? Take some time to think about what this means for your daily life.

How does this truth impact your heart? There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus! (Rom. 8:1)

Write out something you've learned about God in 1 John 1.

How does this encourage your spirit today?