

The First Letter of John
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The New Testament, in addition to the Gospel of John, contains three so-called “letters” which have also been attributed to the Apostle John. However, based on historical research, tradition, and literary analysis, this is what we can say.

First, there is a tradition that goes back to the period of the “Apostolic Fathers”—the generation after the apostles—that claims that John, together with a circle of believers that included Mary, left Jerusalem during the Jewish war from 66-70 and settled in Ephesus. At that time, Ephesus was actually a port city whose claim to fame was a large temple built in honor of the goddess Artemis. In the book of Acts, Luke records that Paul lived there for a period and established a Christian congregation—referred to at the time as people of “The Way of the Lord.” In fact, Acts 19: 23-41 tells the story of how Paul’s evangelistic work created a riot. There is also a letter in the New Testament addressed to the Ephesians which is attributed to Paul. Whether there is any connection between these believers and community tradition ascribed to the Apostle John is unknown. In any case, there is a grotto there to this day where it is supposed that the so-called “Johannine” community lived.

That there is a close connection between the Gospel of John and these three “letters,” which are more like position papers, is clear from the concepts and the nature of the composition. However, it is not clear that they share a common author. Some scholars have concluded that the letters were written by an elder of John’s community who was rooted in the teachings of the Gospel of John.

Here is what we know. John’s Gospel was the last to appear, probably around the year 90 A.D. While it is not impossible that John, the son of Zebedee, was the author, it is more likely that the Gospel appeared later and was based on the oral tradition about Jesus that was preserved in his community. An early church Father, Clement of Alexandria, described John’s Gospel as a “spiritual account” based on its theological and conceptual framework. The Gospel account refers to John as “the beloved disciple” and also points to the fact that, unlike Peter, John was not martyred for his faith and that he lived well into old age.

1st John was probably written at a later date. One clue to this is that it condemns the people who do not believe Jesus was truly human—the so-called “Docetists,” a Greek word that means “seems.” That is, there were some Gnostic writers who claimed that Jesus only *seemed* to be human. According to their view, appearances can deceive. Jesus was only divine and not human. Since this idea came along after the apostolic age, it was not likely that John the Apostle wrote it.

Luther lectured on this document, calling it “an outstanding epistle...so beautifully and gently does it picture Christ to us.” This is the theme of this simple and yet highly spiritual document, namely, the person of Jesus Christ in whom we receive Divine love, and through whom we receive eternal life.

Chapter 1

In 1:1-4, the author explains that what he writes is based on being a first-hand witness. Referring to Jesus as “the word of Life,” he assures his readers that everything he says is based on first hand testimony. “...we declare to you what we have seen and heard...” The reason he writes is so the readers “May have fellowship with us.” Verse 4 concludes with an idea stated in an identical way in John’s Gospel. “We are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.”

The idea that fellowship with Jesus Christ leads to “complete joy” is distinctive of the Johannine literature. The human heart seeks and desires the fullness of love and life. This is available only through the “revelation” of God in Jesus Christ. Spiritual union with Christ is said to be attained in the gospel of John through the gift of the Spirit. (John 16) Here the author does not mention the Spirit. Nevertheless, joy comes from “our fellowship...with the Father and with his son Jesus Christ.” (Vs. 5)

In verses 5-10, the author expresses another distinctively Johannine idea, namely, that “God is light.” The idea that Jesus, as the revelation of God, enables us to live in “light” as opposed to “darkness” is also explained in the prologue of John’s gospel. The symbolism clearly suggests that we can see the truth and live in the truth only because God made himself known in Jesus Christ. This symbolism refers to existential truth rather than abstract truth. Existential truth is a truth we live in, not simply a truth we understand with our rational mind. Abstract truth is mathematical truth. We understand a mathematical truth with our minds. We know $2+2=4$ because we have the gift of reason, and reason knows an abstract truth. An existential truth is one we live in. It is a transforming truth. It is given to us and has the power to change us such that we “walk” in the truth.

What is the nature of this change? First, the existential truth of God enables us to recognize that we are in bondage to sin. Our lives are not centered in fellowship with God. As people who are able to “see” that we are alienated from God, we thereby also “see” that we live in sin—rebellion against God. However, on a more positive note, we are also able to see that Jesus’ death on the cross reconciles us to God and thereby “...he who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

On the other hand, this also means that “If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.” Notice how the author says that truth is something that is “in us.” The truth is not an abstract formula or doctrine. It is a person—Jesus Christ. When he lives in us, we have the light of truth; we recognize that he is the truth. This is what it means to be reconciled to God. God’s life and love live in us when Christ lives in us. Apart from him, we live in the darkness of sin and therefore under the threat of death.

The spirituality of John consists in this: that fellowship with God occurs through Christ living in us. As he is one with God, so he brings us into fellowship with God. This fellowship is what confers divine love and eternal life. When we have Christ, we walk in the light, for he is the revelation of the God for us and in us.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2: 1-6 presents Christ as the One whose death on the cross is "...the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world." Because of this, even though we will sin, we know we have an "advocate with the Father." That is, we are not able to make ourselves righteous. We are not able to live without sin. Sin is not just the behavior we exhibit; it's the condition of our hearts that causes the behavior. This we cannot forcibly change. Only Christ, by his loving sacrifice for us, can atone for sin and free us from the condition that causes us to sin. So, forgiveness, which comes from Christ, not only frees us from culpability for past sin, it also frees us from the powers of sin.

This in turn, enables us to "obey his commandments." The author does not yet state what those commandments are. He is focused at this point on asserting that when we are "in him," (another way of expressing the idea that through Christ, we have fellowship with God), we obey him. This is the assurance that we know him—that we are able to obey his commandments.

In this passage, the author also uses another idea from John's Gospel, namely the idea that faith means we "abide" in him. To abide in Christ means that we live in Christ. This is another way of expressing the fact that Jesus Christ is the existential truth of life. Through him, the love of God, and the eternal life of God are given to us. When we walk in Christ, we are empowered to obey his commandments. This is true because he gives us the very thing that he commands us--namely love.

In verses 7-17, the author clearly states what he means by the commandments of Jesus. It is old and new at the same time. It is old because the spirit of the commandment can be discerned in the Ten Commandments. It is new because all these commandments are reduced to one with two dimensions. "You shall love God above all things, and your neighbor as yourself." It would be helpful to look at this in some detail because "John" also gives examples of what he means.

I want to begin by first looking at the closing verses of this section. Here in verses 15-17, he warns his reader against "love of the world." "What is wrong with love of the world?" one may ask. It's quite simple. Suppose I love some worldly pursuit above all other things. Whatever that might be--say money or success--that desire will own my heart. I will have to be willing to serve that ultimate desire, and do whatever I need to do to acquire it in the same way a slave obeys his master.

The author mentions "young people" as those who have overcome the "evil one." One of the most difficult problems young people face is peer pressure. Suppose my greatest fear is the loss of my friends. This is going to make me vulnerable to doing whatever the peer group wants so that I may continue to be included. This is a perfect open door for what our author calls "the evil one." Peer pressure can lead a person to go down "the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire." (Shakespeare) Drugs, alcohol, sexual assault—these and many other like things are done in order to remain acceptable to the group. How does a person "conquer" these temptations? By loving God more than the peer group, the money, the

success, or whatever else the world shoves in our face. The love of God is not slavery. It's freedom, for the love of God fulfills the desire of our hearts and enables us to become free and mature, responsible human beings. This is the reason God makes this command. He desires us for himself so that we can be who we were created to be.

This, in turn, leads to the love of others. If our desire for others is not self-serving, a desire based on what we will receive from them such as admiration or acceptance, then it becomes real love. Only having first received God's love will we be able to do this, for God's love frees us from self-serving desires. Hatred for others comes from not receiving what we want from them. Hatred is born out of disappointed self-serving desire. Therefore, "Whoever hates another believer is in the darkness," that is, they do not walk in God's love. This entire section is a clarification of what is meant by God's commandments. His warnings and his assurances are all based on this: "Love God above all things and your neighbor as yourself." When we walk in God's love for us, we are given exactly what he commands us to do.

Verses 18-28 The early Christians believed they were living in the end times. Christ had come. God had acted on his promises for salvation. All had been accomplished. Therefore, surely Christ would return soon. Did he not say this would be the case? Moreover, he warned that the last days would bring on false messiahs, persecution, and suffering. This is precisely what is going on. The Roman emperors are sending Christians to the lions. And Gnostic heresies are breaking out. This being the case, a warning is in order.

"Children, it is the last hour!" This is how John begins this section. He then explains why he believes this. "As you have heard that antichrist is coming, so now many antichrists have come." These people are former members of the community who have left in order to join an early Gnostic group. According to these early Gnostics, Jesus was not truly human. He was spiritual and therefore did not have a human body. His goal was to teach the secret knowledge (gnosis) to those who were destined to escape that evil world of matter and go to the world of spirit where they belonged.

But here is the problem with that. If Jesus were not truly human, if he had not assumed humanity, then neither could he have redeemed humanity. The reason Jesus Christ is our redeemer is because he was the divine Son of God who assumed our humanity in order to redeem it. Moreover, had he not been human, then neither could he have died on the cross. If he had not died, then neither was he resurrected. And if he had not been resurrected, neither will we be resurrected.

John therefore wants to warn his readers that these people who claim to have knowledge (gnosis) in fact do not have knowledge. For if a person denies the Son, that person does not love the Father. They are "antichrists" who know nothing. They live in darkness, not in the light. John therefore wants to warn his readers that these people who claim to love knowledge (gnosis) in fact do not have knowledge. For if a person denies the Son, that person does not love the Father. They are "antichrists" who know nothing. They live in darkness, not in the light.

John is concerned that his readers not be deceived by these Gnostics. He therefore answers them that so long as they abide in what they first learned, they have knowledge. Knowledge here means that they know the truth. The Son is the truth. If through faith you have the Son, then you also have the Father. What they heard from the beginning resulted in being “anointed” by the Son, that is, given the Holy Spirit. This “anointing” teaches them all things. This means that they live in the truth so long as they abide in what they were taught. This is where their confidence comes from. If they abide in this teaching, they will “not be put to shame before him at his coming.” And by the way, that will be very soon.

Chapter 3

Verses 1-10 Because God loves us in Christ, we are made children of God. We are not born thus. We become thus in virtue of God’s love. For when we receive God’s love in Christ, we are enabled to love in return. The gift of God’s love makes us children of God (*i.e.*, people who love one another) because we love through God’s love. This does not mean we are already the people God intends us to be. That will happen when we see him revealed to us. We will be conformed to his image. This gives us hope.

John then defines sin as lawlessness. Therefore, sinners behave in lawless ways. Nothing constrains that behavior. The “Thou shalt nots...” have no controlling effect on them. However, if we abide in him—if through faith his Spirit gains influence over us, we will not sin. Therefore, those who do what is right abide in Christ. Those who don’t abide in Christ will sin.

This is not an optimistic view of human nature. Human nature is prone to sin and evil if left on its own. We therefore need the transforming effect of God’s love. Otherwise we will become lawless. This is precisely why the Son of God was revealed: to destroy the “works of the Devil.” If we are born of God, the Devil’s influence will be destroyed. Otherwise we will remain in bondage to sin.

Verses 11-24 Love is the message of the Christian faith. Cain, who killed his brother Abel, is the exact opposite. Because he was jealous of Abel, Cain acted on that jealousy and murdered him. In other words, Cain’s evil deeds resulted in his rejection, and he responded by lashing out against his brother. Because the Christian community lives in love, the world (symbolized by Cain) hates Christians. This should be no surprise. Such people live in death because without the love of God they do not have eternal life. We have love in this way: that Jesus laid down his life for us. Therefore we also ought to lay down our lives for one another. This includes acts of charity. If we are unwilling to help a brother or sister, we don’t have love living in us. We can assure our hearts before God and have no fear when we love others.

The fundamental commandment is that we are to believe in Christ, and this means loving others for we thereby live in his love. It is the Spirit given to us that accomplishes this.

John's reasoning is simple and uncomplicated. He goes right to the heart of the matter. Without worrying about the details. For example, in this section he equates love with eternal life and hatred with death. This is not a simple matter of the one causing the other. John is talking about what occupies or lives in a person's heart. For John, faith has a strong mystical element to it. Jesus Christ is a living presence whose life we subjectively participate in. This is what he means when he says that Jesus "abides" in us. Moreover, it is the Spirit who conveys the living presence of Christ into our hearts. "And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit that he has given us." (Vs 24)

The Spirit is God's love. Jesus, as the gift of God's love made manifest externally and historically on the cross, comes to us through the Spirit and lives in us subjectively—and we could also say spiritually. So long as we have this gift abiding in our hearts, we have both divine love and life. We participate in that divine love and life in the present. This is why John affirms that anyone who has love also has life and has the ability to obey the commandment to love. If a person has hate in his heart, then neither does he have divine love and, lacking that, the person also lacks life. Only God's Spirit gives eternal life. Our bodies are mortal. Left to themselves, they will die. Everything depends upon whether or not we have mystically received the Spirit of God.

Chapter 4

Verses 1-6 John then warns the community against false prophets. There are many prophets. How do we know which one is right? If they confess that Jesus is the Christ, and that he has come in the flesh. "You have conquered them," John writes, for the One who is in them is greater than the false prophets. The false prophets are from the world. Christians are from God. Whoever is from the world does not listen to the gospel. This is how they discern the truth from falsehood.

Here John returns to the problems of the antichrist. Again, the antichrist is the one who denies that Jesus came in the flesh. Unless the Son of God assumed our humanity, he could not be our savior. And yet, John affirms, the One who is in us is greater than the world. That is, when we participate in Jesus Christ through the gift of the Spirit living in us, the lies of the world cannot overcome us.

In verses 7-21 John simply reflects on the theme "God is love." God's love was made known in Christ. We have that love when we have received the Spirit. Having received the Spirit, we will live in return. The love we have for others is a gift--the gift of God's love for us. Therefore, having received this love, we will love our brothers and sisters.

Chapter 5

Here in verses 1-5 John turns to the theme of faith. Faith means that we believe from the heart, for faith is a gift of the Spirit that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. When faith is

created in us, we have been born of God for God is the creator of our faith. Faith therefore is a miracle. Apart from God's Spirit, faith is not possible. This also means that when we have faith, we participate in the life of God through the Spirit. Faith is fellowship with God. John again adds that when we love God through faith, which is a participation in God's love for us, we also love others. This commandment is not burdensome because the faith God gives us is a divine creation. We are able to believe because God's love gives us that ability. This is what John means by overcoming the world. We are freed from living in conformity to the world's values because of the gift of God's love.

In the section of verses 6-12, John turns to the theme of testimony: how we know that Jesus is the Christ. He lists three means: water, blood, and the Spirit. By water and blood, he may be referring to the sacraments of baptism and communion. These are the elements in each. However, he also includes the Spirit because water and the sacrament of the altar are nothing without the testimony of the Spirit that comes through them. The sacraments are means of grace because we receive the Spirit of God through these means.

He underscores this by saying we have this testimony in our hearts. The Spirit "testifies" to Jesus in our hearts by giving us faith in him, and the faith is "laying hold of Christ." (Luther) That is, Christ is present in faith.

In verses 13-21 and in the Epilogue John tells his readers that the purpose of his writing is to assure them that they have eternal life. Moreover, he encourages them to have boldness before God knowing he hears our prayers and answers them. We should therefore pray for one another, especially when we fall to temptations that are not mortal, for he forgives sin. Mortal sin is that which permanently separates us from God. That is mortal by definition because separation from God leads to death.

When we are born of God, we are given the strength to overcome temptation and avoid sin. While the world is under the power of the evil one, those born of God are protected by God's grace in Jesus Christ. He is our strength to withstand temptation.

The book ends with an exhortation to steer clear of idols.