

## WHY THE VILLAGE CHURCH IS TEACHING 1, 2, & 3 JOHN?

Of all the Biblical characters, I relate to John's personality the most: *intense, sometimes rough around the edges (ok, he is a lot of times), aggressive, usually good-intentioned, struggling with pride, etc...* I also relate deeply to his experiences of grace, redemption, and transformation in Christ. It is amazing to see God take someone with the nickname "Son of Thunder" (referring to his hot temper) and transform him through trials and the Spirit into the gracious "Apostle of Love".

I desire for God to do the same work in my life, just as I know you do as well: *to redeem us from our worldly ways and desires and transform us more and more into the image of Christ.* At the end of my life, I desire to be known as a "husband, father, friend, and pastor who loved God and others". John has taught me that this transformation is only found in and through Christ when we abide in Him. John quoted Jesus in his gospel saying: "Abide in Me. Apart from Me you can do nothing."

**2009 was dedicated** to the theme: "First things First" from Colossians 1:18, which says that Jesus is "the head of the body...that in all things he might have first place!" In a year filled with much transition, loss, grief, transformed lives, salvation, and joy, we wanted to ensure that we kept Jesus as the head of our wonderful church and the most important person in everything we do. We do not want to do anything apart from Him.

Our desire is to continually unify the Village Church under Christ's name and for Christ's goal: *the redemption and transformation of lives so they might be complete in Christ!* From a pastoral perspective, this has been one of the most encouraging years I have experienced. Through very tough times personally, communally, and economically, our love for one another has abounded more and more and proved a strong testimony to our children, friends, and community. Our faithfulness to Christ and the Village Church in love will continue to be the ideal soil for the Spirit to work and transform lives for the glory of God.

**The theme for 2010** has grown from what God is so powerfully doing in our midst:

*Loving God, each other, and our community with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength.*

In a word, our theme is **love**. We have the profound joy of not just telling those in our life about God's love, but showing them. For many, their main God-concept is developed simply by watching God's people (you and I) live! We want to show and tell those in our lives about God's great love for them as we learn in a deeper way through the cross of Jesus Christ to love Him, to love each other, and to love our community.

The books of 1, 2, and 3 John continually call us back to this central theme of love. I would summarize the application of John's short letters like this: *As we abide in Christ and the truth of His love, we grow in our love for Him, others, and those around us.*

**May 2010 be a year where we experience more fully the love of Christ that Paul so powerfully speaks of to the church in Ephesus:**

*For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth is named, that according to the riches of his glory he may grant you to be strengthened with power through his Spirit in your inner being, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith--that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.*

**- Ephesians 3:14-19**

**In Christ**

*Pastor Michael Fuelling*

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### **AUTHOR: JOHN THE SON OF ZEBEDEE**

**John:** "The one whom Jesus loved", a disciple and cousin of Jesus Christ, the son of Zebedee, and the "Son of Thunder". Throughout church history this John is widely accepted to be the author of the Gospel of John, the three short letters that bear his name, and the book of Revelation.

**John the Elder:** In 1, 2, and 3 John the author does not outright share his identity. In 1 John he is anonymous. In 2 and 3 John he refers to himself simply as "the Elder". The style, content, and title "Elder" leave John's identity without question for his original and intended audience.

When John refers to himself as the "Elder", he is referring to three things specifically:

- First, John describes himself as “the Elder” referring to his advancement in years at the time these letters were written (around 90 years old).
- Second, “the Elder” refers to his pastoral responsibility over a series of churches in Asia Minor.
- Third, “the Elder” refers to his unique position of leadership in the first century church as the sole living disciple of Christ Jesus at the time these books were written.

**John’s Life:** Some 60 years after the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, John the Son of Zebedee is the only living first generation disciple who had walked with Him, talked with Him, learned under Him, and shared an intimate fellowship with Him that so few have. So close was John’s relationship with Jesus that:

1. John was a part of the inner circle, one of three disciples that Jesus invested in most deeply (along with his brother James and Simon Peter),
2. In the Gospel which bears his name he refers to himself 5 times as the disciple “whom Jesus loved”,
3. After Jesus’ death, John took Jesus’ mother under his wing and cared for her as his own mother.

As we embark to study the words of this man let us not forget that ***our words are the overflow of our heart***, and our heart is largely affected by the things we have experienced. Before we study John’s Words, let’s look at a few circumstances in John’s life that helped shape who he is and thus what he writes.

John and his brother James were among the first men that Jesus called to be His disciples. Together they were the tough and rough Sons of Zebedee, hard-working Jews from Galilee, and fisherman by family trade. James and John were in fact cousins to Jesus. Their mother Salome was Mary’s sister, a devoted follower of Jesus. When Jesus commissioned them he gave to them the nickname ‘Sons of Thunder’ reflecting the nature of their personalities: intense, volatile, quick-tempered, bigoted, and loud.

By Jesus’ side, John held a prominent role amongst the disciples and had many unique experiences. As stated above, together along with Simon Peter and his brother James, John was a part of Jesus’ inner circle of intimate friends. This inner circle allowed them to be the only witnesses of the raising of Jairus’ daughter (Mk 5:37), the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:1), and Jesus’ agony that took place in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mt. 26:37). Although often disappointing Jesus in his self-absorption, Jesus chose John again and again to accompany Him throughout some of his most glorious and humbling experiences.

Christ gave John another unique responsibility when only John and Peter were sent into the city to make preparations for His final Passover meal, which would become the Last Supper (Lk. 22:8). During this meal John was seated next to Jesus and leaned on Christ’s chest (John 13:23-25), an act showing a unique friendship and intimacy between him and His Savior.

These accounts of John shed deep insight into his personality as he continually struggles with pride, bigotry, and a hot temper. His close affiliation and kinship to Christ repeatedly challenged his desire for titles that would affirm the special bond they truly held. This pride seems to have significantly decreased as John grew in grace and age.

It is generally accepted that John was also that “other disciple” who with Peter after Jesus’ arrest followed Him into the palace of the high-priest (John 18:15). At the deepest and darkest hour of humanity John alone remained near Jesus. As Jesus hung on the cross paying the price for all sin, John remained at the foot of the cross with Mary promising Jesus he would care for his mother (John 19:25-27). After the Resurrection John is sometimes speculated to be the unnamed disciple who ran together with Peter towards the tomb and thus the first of the apostles to believe that Jesus had truly risen (John 20:2-10). It was John who first recognized Jesus as He came towards them on the shore after the resurrection. After Jesus’ Ascension and the descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost, John, together with Peter, took a prominent part in the founding and guidance of the early church. He is also seen with Peter at the healing of the lame man in the Temple (Acts 3:1). With Peter he is also thrown into prison (Acts 4:3) and visiting the newly converted in Samaria (Acts 8:14).

Christ had such an impact on John’s life that from his first introduction until his final words we see that this “Son of Thunder” had become an apostle filled with grace, truth, and love. John focuses on the love of Christ unlike any other New Testament author and pays special attention to brotherly devotion just as he had experienced with Christ Himself.

John was imprisoned several times throughout his life. The emperor Domitian was so threatened by John and his great influence that church tradition tells us Domitian sentenced John to death by dipping him in boiling oil. Miraculously unharmed by the experience, Domitian banished John to the Isle of Patmos for a period of four years in order to silence him for good. While there John ironically penned the 21 chapter gospel that bears his name, the 22 chapter book we now know as “Revelation”, the three short letters known as 1, 2, and 3 John, and most likely other books or letters we are not aware of. Early Christian writers tell us that in the later years John lived in Ephesus on the coast of Asia Minor. He served and

oversaw the churches of that region and others as their “Elder” in every respect of the term. The ‘seven churches which are in Asia’ (Rev. 1:11), to which he addressed the Book of Revelation, were but a few of the churches under his leadership.

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## INTRODUCTION TO JOHN’S LETTERS:

*“When the apostle John finally sat down to gather his thoughts and express his convictions on parchment, he was an old man. So much had changed since he had walked with Jesus as one of the original Twelve. Those simple yet powerful three-plus years John spent with Jesus were followed by six long and painful decades. Erosion had set into the life of the church. The newness of fresh faith had begun to wane, now that the church was in the hands of second- and third-generation Christians. A subtle, lethargic boredom had replaced the excitement modeled by those early followers of Jesus. The first thrill was over . . . the hot flame of devotion reduced to a flicker. In a setting like that, the subtle seeds of heresy are easily sown and quickly grown. Cults feed off complacent churches, where dynamic enthusiasm is replaced by ho-hum indifference. Tragically, that is exactly what was happening to the church in John’s day — and that is precisely what led him to write this letter. He hoped to revive his younger readers to return to an authentic, contagious walk with Christ. His message was relevant then and remains vital today. Let’s hear it and heed it!”*

- Chuck Swindoll

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## AUDIENCE:

Though 1, 2, and 3 John have specific intended recipients, a letter from an Apostle was a significant event and one that was shared with as many churches as possible. These letters were most likely read before the entire congregation at numerous churches and on numerous occasions.

**1 & 2 John:** These letters were intended for a specific group of churches in Asia Minor with a common theological heritage, historical roots, and leader in John the Apostle. It is probable that the the seven churches in Revelation are the primary recipients of these two letters. The recipient of 2 John is referred to simply as “the Chosen Lady”, probably a reference to the church communities he is addressing.

**3 John:** This is a personal letter to Gaius, an Elder at one of the church’s John oversees. Very little is actually known about this Elder.

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## THE DATE OF WRITING & ORDER

The date of these letters is a subject that has long been debated. The most accepted point of view places these letters fairly late in the first century somewhere between 85 and 95AD. Although the order of John’s three short letters is numbered in our Bibles today, there has also been debate regarding their chronological order. 1 John was probably authored after the Gospel of John and possibly even after 2 John.

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## CONTEXT:

**1 & 2 John:** John is writing to address a clear problem in his churches which is creating social, personal, and theological conflict. Most importantly for John are the theological conflicts, which are the ultimate cause of the social and personal conflicts. Specifically, the problems John addresses deal with the nature and implications of Jesus’ nature, Jesus’ work on the cross, and the salvation Jesus came to purchase on the cross.

The false doctrine John is reacting against was taking ground in his churches and causing some to fall away from Christ and salvation. The situation was bad enough that apparently a new “church” or gathering of some sort who had rejected John’s teaching and authority was emerging and causing controversy in John’s churches (1 John 2:19).

### Possible Heresies John is responding to:

**1. Pre-Gnosticism:** this false teaching was the forerunner for what is known as the *Gnosticism*. Gnosticism emerged out of dualistic Platonic thought as it was applied to the Bible. Gnosticism came from the Greek word “*gnosis*” meaning “*knowledge*”.

### Gnosticism at its core claimed:

1. A sharp dualism (worldview that claims two opposing forces) between spirit and matter:
  - Spiritual realm is inherently good
  - Matter and physical realm are inherently evil
2. That since matter is evil, Jesus could not be God in the flesh.
3. That salvation is essentially deliverance from the body of flesh and its dominion. This deliverance was achieved by attaining enlightenment and knowledge of mysteries imparted by special revelation. Death was considered return to the goodness of the spiritual realm.

There is no proof that Gnosticism existed in its developed form in the first century AD, but it is probable that the central doctrines and core beliefs of Gnosticism were being developed and incubated during this time.

**2. Docetism:** This is a form of the Gnostic heresy (*which comes from the Greek word “dokeo” meaning “to appear”*) which teaches that Jesus, being God who is spirit (remember matter is evil), only “appeared” to be flesh and suffer. At best Jesus Christ was only a mirage and at worst just another man. The implications of this teaching are far-reaching as it would imply for both Christ and salvation that:

1. Jesus did not become flesh as the Bible says
2. Jesus was not the mediator between God and man as he was neither fully God nor man,.
3. Orthodox Christianity, the cross, and right Christian living need to be rethought and reinterpreted in light of this new teaching

Though Docetism was not fully developed at the time 1, 2, and 3, John were written, it is probable that its core doctrines were developing and creeping into the church during the first century.

**3. Cerinthism:** Cerinthus was a Jew from Alexandria and the disciple of the Jewish platonic philosopher Philo. He was considered the arch-enemy of John the Apostle as they both lived in Ephesus and taught opposing doctrines. Cerinthus’ teaching reinterpreted the deity of Christ and was another form of pre-Gnosticism. In short, Cerinthus’ from of pre-Gnosticism believed that :

- Jesus was just a man, albeit a moral and wise man.
- Jesus received “the Christ”, the Spirit of Divinity, at His baptism and this Spirit departed at His crucifixion.

Whichever heresy John is responding to, the tendency toward extreme dualistic and subsequent Gnostic thought led often in one of two deviant directions:

**1. Hedonism:** *because matter is evil and the spiritual realm is supremely good and most important, humans are free to indulge without hesitation in the physical pleasures of this world as what is done in the flesh has no eternal or spiritual ramifications*

**2. Asceticism:** *because the flesh is evil, it must be subdued and purged through harsh rigor and the withholdment of physical pleasures.*

**What we know:** False teaching always leads to wrong living and sin, even if it is “minor”. John is intensely concerned with truth because all lies lead to wrong thinking which leads to wrong living!

**Lies = Wrong thinking = Wrong living**

**The false teachers in 1 and 2 John did or may have:**

- Claimed fellowship with God as His children while being sinless (1 Jn. 1:9-10)
- Believed that God is light and that they lived in the light. This theme in John may be a response to the false teacher’s terminology.
- Because they denied their sinfulness, also denied the atonement and the ongoing need for it.
- Rejected Jesus as the Christ or the Son of God, or at least saw this as optional (1 Jn. 2:2. 5:1, 5)
- May have denied that Jesus had come in the flesh (1 Jn. 4:2, 2 Jn. 1:7)
- Denied by their lifestyle of disobedience the validity of Jesus’ commands (1 Jn. 2:4)

**3 John:** The same theological and social context provide the backdrop for 3 John, but this letter is written to address a specific problem in a specific church. The recipient of the letter, Gaius, faces a troublemaker named Diotrophes. Very little is actually known about Gaius or Diotrophes.

**PURPOSE:**

**1 John:** John lays out for his readers his four primary purposes for writing 1 John . He writes that his churches may 1. Be filled with Joy in Christ, 2. Not sin, 3. Be able to discern truth from lies, and 4. Have confidence in their salvation in Christ.

The chart below is a helpful guide in understanding John’s purposes in writing 1 John:

**SURVEY CHART OF 1 JOHN**

Fellowship with God Produces . . .				
	A JOYFUL LIFE “These things we write, so that our joy may be made complete” (1:4).	A CLEAN LIFE “I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin” (2:1).	A DISCERNING LIFE “These things I have written to you concerning those who are trying to deceive you” (2:26).	A CONFIDENT LIFE “These things I have written to you . . . so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13).
	CHAPTER 1	CHAPTER 2:1-17	CHAPTERS 2:18-4:6	CHAPTERS 4:7-5:21
<b>How?</b>	By Walking (1:7)	By Obeying (2:3-5)	By Testing (4:1)	By Believing (5:10)
<b>What?</b>	Light	Love	Truth	Knowledge
<b>Who?</b>	Son of God (1:3, 7)	Advocate (2:1)	Holy One (2:20)	Propitiation (4:10) “Satisfaction”

**2 John:** John writes to urge his readers to love each other (vs. 5) and beware of deceivers (vs. 7-8). He offers practical counsel on showing hospitality to traveling missionaries (Vs. 10-11) and seeks to prepare “the elect lady” for his anticipated visit in the near future (vs. 12).

**3 John:** 3 John is written primarily to address an issue between Gaius and Diotrophes. John had three main purposes in penning this letter:

- To encourage Gaius for his treatment of missionaries
- To express disapproval over Diotrophes, who refuses to welcome these same missionaries and submit to John’s authority as an Apostle
- To commend an itinerant minister, Demetrius, to Gaius and that he be received. Demetrius may have been the carrier of the letter!

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## PROBLEMS:

1 John especially has been one of the most abused books in the Bible. There are some polarizing statements that, if isolated and not taken in the context of the whole book and audience, will lead to false conclusions about the Christian life and salvation.

Specifically are texts that imply true Christians always obey God and can be sinless. We learn from the book as a whole that no Christian can perfectly obey God (1 John 1:9-10), which is why Jesus died on the cross for our sins. This specific heresy is just one of the false teachings John is seeking to dispel.

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## SOME KEY THEMES:

- Light & dark
- Life and death
- Truth and error
- Christ & anti-Christ
- Love & hate
- The character of God
- The centrality of Christ
- Discipleship
- Love, unity, and fellowship
- Sound teaching
- Discernment
- Assurance and confidence of salvation
- Hospitality