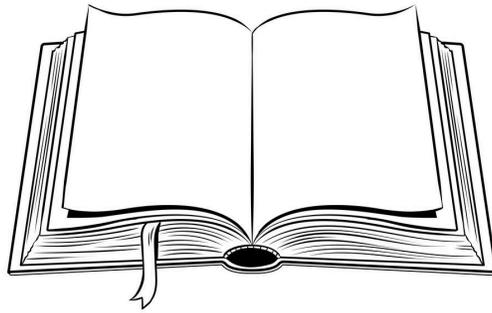


BIBLE STUDY



The Letters of John



TRINITY
METHODIST CHURCH

Bill Higgs

OVERVIEW
of the **THREE LETTERS**

1 JOHN

INTRODUCTION

Date | Destination | Purpose | Author

Chapters

CONTEXT | CONTENT | MESSAGES

1 - God is Light

2 - Love and Hate

3 - The Christian Life

4 - God is Love

5 - The Real God

INTRODUCTION to 2nd & 3rd Letters

Date | Destination | Author

2 JOHN

CONTEXT | CONTENT | MESSAGE

Walk in Obedience

3 JOHN

CONTEXT | CONTENT | MESSAGE

Keep on Walking in Truth & Love

All scripture references are from the *New International Version (NIV)* unless otherwise noted.

OVERVIEW of 1, 2 & 3 John

Date | Destination | Purpose | Author

Here is a concise introduction/overview of the letters of John, from the Bible Resources division of the *American Bible Society*:

Why were 1, 2, and 3 John written?

The letters of John were written in order to encourage followers of Jesus to remain faithful to the truth. All three texts were addressed to Christians, but... also to those with whom the author disagrees. In other words, the author is simultaneously supporting fellow believers while sharply attacking his opponents and their positions. The foremost theological argument of these texts is that Jesus, the Son of God, was truly human and really shed his blood to take away sins (1:7). Some followers were falsely claiming that Jesus only appeared to be a human being, but he was really a purely spiritual being. These teachers also believed that spiritual life was greater than moral life, and spiritual knowledge was more important than moral rules. They taught that moral rules were only for those people who could not see beyond the physical level of life. For example, they believed that their spiritual rebirth made it impossible for them to sin, so they had no sins to confess (1:9,10). In rebuttal, the author of 1 John puts forth the argument that Jesus “had a truly human body” (4:2) and is truly God’s Son (2:22; 3:23), and that God’s true children (“the children of light”) are those who also obey God and love one another (3:11-24). Only those who believe that Jesus Christ was truly human and who love one another really have eternal life.

Besides encouraging the Lord’s followers, 2 John warns them about the liars and enemies of Christ who were claiming that Jesus Christ was not truly a human being and that he belonged only to the spirit world. It is possible that what the author has in view are ideas that later came to be associated with Gnosticism, which considered the entire physical and material universe as evil. They argued that if Jesus was God he could not have been human, since humans are part of the created universe. They also claimed that a superior spiritual understanding would separate them from the physical world. The writer of 2 John says that the Lord’s followers should not welcome these liars into their homes because to do so would be like accepting their false message as well, and it would put believers at risk of straying from what they had been taught regarding Christ (verse 9).

The writer of 3 John offers prayers and thanks for his friend, Gaius, who has been welcoming the followers of the Lord who traveled to Gaius’ area with the message about Jesus. One leader of Gaius’ church group named Diotrephes has been refusing to welcome any of the Lord’s followers and was urging others not to welcome them

either. So, Gaius is encouraged to keep welcoming the Lord's followers even if Diotrophes does not.

Taken together, the themes and overall style and tone of these texts suggest that they were written in order to bolster and implicitly caution believers by sharply censuring the theology of the opponents so that the church community to which the letters were sent would not be tempted to stray away from their beliefs.

What's the story behind the scene?

First John was probably written late in the first century or very early in the second century A.D. At the time of its writing, the early church was trying to determine what made someone a true child of God, and it is clear from all three of these texts that the audience to which they are addressed was experiencing sharp division. Like many of Paul's letters, 2 and 3 John give glimpses into the kinds of problems local churches experienced at the end of the first century A.D. Because many of these problems--such as gossip, concerns over correct teaching, and leadership struggles--are not unique to the first century, these short letters can provide helpful insights to church leaders today. Moreover, this was a period in which many new religions were emerging. One trend among these new religions was toward Gnosticism, a movement which described the physical world as evil and the spiritual world as good. Gnostics believed that the goal of humans is to get special knowledge that would free them from the physical world. They claimed that this superior knowledge separated them from this corrupt world. But the writer of 1 John shows that God made the world and sent Jesus to free the world from evil and to unite the physical world with God.

It is interesting to note that Irenaeus was the first to mention 1 John (around 180 A.D.), and he did so in the context of attacking Gnostic Christians. The text was recognized as canonical by the 4th century, and authorship was attributed to the Apostle John, who was also understood to be the author of the Fourth Gospel as well. The issue of authorship is still not entirely settled, and the matter is further complicated when 2 and 3 John are brought into the equation. These two letters appear to have been written by the same individual. However, they differ significantly from 1 John and the Fourth Gospel in that the author refers to himself as "the elder." Given the thematic, linguistic, theological, and Christological similarities between the Fourth Gospel and each of the Johannine Epistles, it is quite likely that no matter how many authors are responsible for the various texts, they were all nonetheless members of the same community.

The "elect lady and her children" (verse 1, NRSV) and the "elect sister" (verse 13, NRSV) probably refer to groups of the Lord's followers (church communities) rather than to two individuals. Perhaps it is even a reference to one or more nearby churches.

How are 1, 2, and 3 John constructed?

A number of biblical scholars have pointed out that **First John** lacks a clearly discernable structure making it difficult to arrive at a consensus on how it should be outlined. Following is just one possible way of sketching out the contents and message of the book:

- Prologue (1:1-4)
- Living in the light (1:1—2:17)
- Light and darkness (1:5—2:11)
- Believers and the world (2:12-17)
- Truth and untruth (2:18—4:6)
- Truth and life (2:18-29)
- The children of God and the children of the devil (3:1-24)
- Testing the spirits of truth and of error (4:1-6)
- God's love and its results (4:7—5:12)
- God's love and that of the Christian community (4:7—5:5)
- The Son and the witness to the Son (5:6-12)
- Epilogue: Right knowledge and right action (5:13-21)

Second John is written in the style of a letter and may be outlined in the following way:

- Greetings (1-3)
- Obeying the truth and living in love (4-13)
- Loving one another (4-6)
- Being aware of deceivers (7-9)
- Guarding one's hospitality (10-11)
- Final greetings (12-13)

Third John, which is also in the format of a letter, may be outlined in the following way:

- Greetings and commendation (1-8)
- Commendation for walking in truth (2-4)
- Commendation for supporting missionaries (5-8)
- Diotrophes and Demetrius (9-12)
- Diotrophes criticized (9-10)
- Demetrius praised (11-12)
- Final greetings (13-15)

Here, in less than 10 minutes, you have a visual overview of the 3 letters:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3QkE6nKylM&vl=en>

INTRODUCTION TO 1st JOHN

Date | Destination | Purpose | Author

William Barclay introduces the First Letter of John, in *The Daily Study Bible*, this way:

First John is entitled a letter but it has no opening address nor closing greetings such as the letters of Paul have. And yet no one can read it without feeling its intensely personal character. Beyond all doubt the man who wrote it had in his mind's eye a definite situation and a definite group of people. Both the form and the personal character of *First John* will be explained if we think of it as what someone has called "a loving and anxious sermon" written by a pastor who loved his people and sent out to the various churches over which he had charge.

Any such letter is produced by an actual situation apart from which it cannot be fully understood. If, then, we wish to understand *First John* we have first of all to try to reconstruct the situation which produced it, remembering that it was written in Ephesus a little after A.D. 100.

These short opening paragraphs identify the date and the destination of the letter. Who wrote it? And what more do we know about when and to whom *First John* was written?

Scholars are almost unanimous in agreeing that the apostle John (brother of James, son of Zebedee) wrote this letter as well as the Gospel that bears his name. An early second-century bishop named Polycarp, who knew John personally, testified that John wrote this letter. And, as Chuck Swindoll points out, the author indicates he was one of the apostles when he "clearly places himself as part of a group of apostolic eyewitnesses to the life and ministry of Jesus," noting that "what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also" (1 John 1:3). John lived in Ephesus after Jesus died, and legend has it that he brought Jesus' mother Mary there to live with him in fulfillment of Jesus' declaration from the Cross that henceforth she was John's mother.

The date for this Letter is generally agreed to be between 85 and 89 A.D. Most scholars believe it was written after the Gospel (83-85 A.D.) and before Revelation (90 A.D.). Although, as we see in the quote above, Barclay suggests it was written "a little after A.D. 100."

This letter was either written to one congregation, or as a 'circular' to be sent to several, maybe to the seven churches of Revelation 1 and 2. The consensus is that Ephesus was where John wrote it... we're not sure if it was intended for Ephesus alone, or if it was shared with other congregations. What we know of Ephesus around that time should give us a good context for the environment in which this letter -- or "anxious sermon" -- was written.

Ephesus, though three miles from the coast, was a port city -- situated on the banks of the river Cayster. Around the end of the first century it was considered the greatest city in the province of Asia, and was a "free city." This meant that, while still under Roman rule, it has its own town clerk, its own courts, its own popular assembly, and its own officers appointed to preside over the public games. This made *Ephesus* an important city politically. It would later become the capital of the Roman province of Asia.



Ephesus, whose name means 'desirable', was also important economically. A great commercial centre, it was known as the market of Asia. Its harbour lay at the crossroads of the trade routes connecting east, west and south, and it was, therefore, a cosmopolitan city, having a large population from all around the Mediterranean. In addition to the natives, there were descendants of the colonists from Athens, three other different Greek groups, and a sizable Jewish population.

Important as a religious centre also, Ephesus was home to many different religions, and had numerous temples and shrines. Pagan worship was perhaps at its highest here, and superstition ran rampant. The city was the guardian of the goddess of fertility, Artemis, also known as Diana. You may recall that Demetrius and other silversmiths who made idols of Artemis tried to create problems for the Christians (see Acts 19:23-41). The temple of this goddess was home to hundreds of sacred prostitutes, and was also an asylum for criminals. This religion in particular, and the city in general, was notoriously evil.

The temple of Artemis was one of the architectural wonders of the ancient world; another was the theatre that Demetrius and the the mob went into -- a huge building that could seat 24,500 people!

It was extremely difficult for Christianity to grow and spread in the city of Ephesus, but it did. The Christians there had to be strong, for their faith was put to the test often and in many ways.

We know that Paul loved the church here dearly (see Acts 20:17-38) and they loved him. Timothy was the first bishop of Ephesus (1 Timothy 1:3). Here laboured faithful workers, such as Aquilla and Priscilla (Acts 18:19), and Apollos (Acts 18:24). This was John's home, and he would certainly be writing "to the district where his writ ran, and that was Ephesus and the surrounding territory" (Barclay).

By the end of the first century, according to Barclay, "certain things had almost inevitably happened within the Church, especially in a place like Ephesus... Many were now second or even third generation Christians. The thrill of the first days had, to some extent at least, passed away... In the first days of Christianity there was a glory and splendour, but now Christianity had become a thing of habit, 'traditional, half-hearted, nominal.' [Believers] had grown used to it and something of the wonder was lost... John was writing at a time when, for some at least, the first thrill was gone and the flame of devotion had died to a flicker."

This *First Letter* of John addresses a heresy making the rounds through the early Church, which came to be known as *Gnosticism* (with a silent 'G') -- from the Greek word *gnosis* from which we get our English word 'knowledge'. This heresy came in several forms, but all held that the spirit (*pneuma*) had to be released from the body (*sōma*) in order to be able to follow God. But they believed that release, as Barclay explains, "could be won only by long and arduous study which only the leisured intellectual could ever undertake." This process of enlightenment "produced a spiritual aristocracy who looked with contempt and even hatred on lesser men."

Barclay summarizes what the Gnostics believed and taught:

They talked of being born of God, of walking in the light, of having no sin, of dwelling in God, of knowing God. These were their catch phrases. They had no idea of destroying the Church and the faith; by their way of it they were going to cleanse the Church of dead wood and make Christianity an intellectually respectable philosophy, fit to stand beside the great systems of the day. But the effect of their teaching was to deny the incarnation, to eliminate the Christian ethic and to make fellowship within the Church impossible. It is little wonder that John seeks, with such fervent pastoral devotion, to defend the churches he loved from such an insidious attack from within. This was a threat far more perilous than any heathen persecution; the very existence of the Christian faith was at stake."

We shall see how John addresses these concerns, and the teachings of Jesus that he reinforces in defending the faith, as we explore *First John*.

Here is an outline of *First John* by Chuck Swindol -- it is a helpful glance across the 5 chapters highlighting the main themes and teachings of this 'letter' or 'sermon'.

FIRST JOHN

		Walking with the God of Light		Responding to the God of Love			
Prologue (1:1-4)		Living in the Light	Staying in the Light	Practicing the Righteousness and Love of God	Testing the Spirits	Loving Others as God Loved Us	Believing in Jesus
		CHAPTERS 1:5-2:11	CHAPTER 2:12-27	CHAPTERS 2:28-3:23	CHAPTERS 3:24-4:6	CHAPTER 4:7-21	CHAPTER 5
Fellowship with God Produces a . . .		Clean life	Discerning life	Loving life			Confident life
Emphasis		Light	Truth	Love			Knowledge
Means		Obeying	Perceiving	Sacrificing			Believing
Christ		Advocate (2:1)	Holy One (2:20)	Son of God (3:8)	Savior of the world (4:14)		
Purposes		That we may have fellowship and joy (1:3-4)	That we may not sin (2:1)	That we may not be deceived (2:26)	That we may know that we have eternal life (5:13)		
Theme		Living in fellowship with God, who is light and love					
Key Verses		1:5-7	4:10-16			5:11-13	
Christ in 1 John		Jesus is the Word of Life, who is God come in the flesh to bring eternal life to those who believe (1:1; 4:2; 5:20).					

Copyright © 1983, 1998, 2010 by Charles R. Swindoll, Inc. All rights reserved worldwide.

Now we shall look in depth at the text of the *First Letter* (or Epistle) of John...

Chapter 1 - God is Light

We shall consider this first chapter in 3 sections, beginning with verses 1-4:

1 That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked at and our hands have touched—this we proclaim concerning the Word of life. 2 The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and has appeared to us. 3 We proclaim to you what we have seen and heard, so that you also may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son, Jesus Christ. 4 We write this to make our joy complete.

The similarity of the opening sentences of chapter 1 of this 1st Letter of John to the opening sentences of chapter 1 of the Gospel of John is immediately obvious. For example:

1 John 1:1	<i>from the beginning</i>	John 1:1	<i>in the beginning</i>
1:1	<i>the Word of life</i>	1:1	<i>the Word of God</i>
1:2	<i>the life appeared</i>	1:4	<i>in him was life</i>
1:2	<i>have seen... testify</i>	1:7	<i>a witness to testify</i>
1:3	<i>fellowship with Father</i>	1:12	<i>become children of God</i>
1:5	<i>God is light</i>	1:4	<i>in him was the light</i>
1:6	<i>do not live out truth</i>	1:1	<i>full of grace and truth</i>

This letter can be seen as an extension of the Gospel, a practical guide to overcoming challenges and effectively living out the Christian faith. Before getting to these challenges and offering encouragement John gives his testimony. As Barclay puts it:

at the beginning of his letter John sets down his right to speak; and it consists in one thing -- in personal experience of Christ (verses 2 and 3).

- (i) He says that he has heard Christ... the true teacher is the [one] who has a message from Jesus Christ because he has heard his voice.
- (ii) He says that he has seen Christ... We cannot see Christ in the flesh as John did, but we can still see him with the eye of faith...
- (iii) He says that he has gazed on Christ... In the Greek the verb for 'to see' is *horan* and it means to see with physical sight. The verb for 'to gaze' is *thearthai* and it means to gaze at someone or something until something is grasped of the significance of that person or thing...
- (iv) He says that his hands actually touched Christ. Luke tells of how Jesus came back to his disciples, when he had risen from the dead, and said, "See my hands and feet, that it is I myself: handle me and see, for a spirit has not flesh and bones as you see that I have (Luke 24:39). Here John is thinking of those people called

Docetists who... refused to believe that God could soil himself by taking human flesh and blood upon himself.

John the sets out his purpose in writing, what his objectives are. He wishes to achieve 3 things:

- 1 - to produce/strengthen fellowship between the believers and God (verse 3);
- 2 - to bring his people joy (verse 4). "Joy is the essence of Christianity." (Barclay);
- 3 - to set Jesus Christ before them as their role model (verse 2).

As we read through the letter we shall see how he accomplishes these objectives. Everything he teaches or encourages is firmly rooted in Jesus the Christ. According to Barclay, John has three main things to say about Jesus in these opening sentences:

- I. First he says that Jesus was "from the beginning. That is to say, in him eternity entered time; in him God personally entered the world of men.
- II. Second, that entry into the world of men was a real entry, it was real manhood that God took upon himself.
- III. Third, through that action there came to men the word of life, the word which can change death into life and mere existence into real living."

These points all echo the Gospel of John, in chapter 1:

- the Word was in the beginning (verse 1)
- the Word became flesh (verse 14)
- in the Word was life (verse 4)

Now we consider the second section of this first chapter of the First Letter, namely verses 5-7:

5 This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. 6 If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live out the truth. 7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.

Throughout the Bible the images of 'light' and 'darkness' speak to that which reveals God and that which hides God, respectively. Here John gives the simplest of definitions of God -- God is light. What does this definition tell us about the nature and character of God? Barclay suggests 5 things that this description of God reveals:

- (i) It tells us that he is splendour and glory...
- (ii) It tells us that God is self-revealing...
- (iii) It tells us of God's purity and holiness...

(iv) It tells us of the guidance of God...

(v) It tells us of the revealing quality in the presence of God. Light is the great revealer... We can never know either the depth to which life has fallen or the height to which it may rise until we see it in the revealing light of God."

While it is important for John to declare that God is light, it is also important for him to reinforce that in him is no darkness! In the New Testament 'darkness' is a metaphor for life without Christ -- the dark and the light are natural enemies, says Barclay. But we are given the assurance that light is always the victor...

- the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness "has not overcome it" (John 1:5)
- we are called out of darkness into Christ's "wonderful light" (1 Peter 2:9)
- Jesus said he had come into the world "as a light" so that "no one who believes in me should stay in darkness (John 12:46)
- the immoral "deeds of darkness" are put aside when we "put on the armor of light" (Romans 13:12)
- the "fruitless deeds of darkness" are exposed when we live as "light in the Lord" (Ephesians 5:8-11)
- believers are challenged to "be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power" in order to overcome the "powers of this dark world" (Ephesians 6:10-12)

John, therefore, draws the conclusion that we cannot be so hypocritical as to claim to have fellowship with God (through Christ, the light) "and yet walk in the darkness" (verse 6). To do so, insists John, is to lie, which means we "do not live out the truth."

John insists, as Barclay puts it, on two things:

- i) He insists that "to have fellowship with the God who is light a man must walk in the light and that, if he is still walking in the moral and ethical darkness of the Christless life, he can not have that fellowship. This is precisely what the Old Testament had said centuries before. God said, "You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am Holy" (Leviticus 19:2). . .
- ii) He insists that these mistaken thinkers have the wrong idea of the truth. He says that, if people who claim to be specially advanced still walk in darkness, they are not *doing* the truth. Exactly the same phrase is used in the Fourth Gospel, when it speaks of him, who does the truth (John 3:21). This means that for the Christian truth is never only intellectual; it is always moral... Truth is not only thinking; it is also acting."

John declared the message that he was given in terms of the contrast between *light* and *darkness* (verse 5). He now expands on this message by referencing the contrast between *truth* and *lies*, which we shall explore in the next section.

We conclude this first chapter as we turn to the third section in verses 8-10:

8 If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. 9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. 10 If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word is not in us.

John accuses the false teachers of being liars 4 times in this First Letter -- the 1st time is in chapter 1, verses 6 and 8. What a terrible indictment, to have it declared that "the truth is not in you." The lie may be in what is said or not said, as well as in what is done, or not done.

The second time John references liars is in chapter 2, verse 4, when he declares that whoever says that they know God but refuse to do what he commands "is a liar, and the truth is not in that person."

The third reference is also in chapter 2, in verse 22, where the question is asked, "Who is a liar?" The answer: "Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ."

And fourthly, in chapter 4, verse 20, we read: "Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar."

Truth is important to John, as is light, because these are ways of identifying with God, who is truth and who is light.

This is why John also calls us to be honest with ourselves... it is not only about judging others by their fruits, how they do or don't reflect light and truth. It is also taking a good look at ourselves -- if we "claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves" and (yes!) we are liars. Or, "the truth is not in us" (verse 8).

Barclay says that the person who claims to have no sin may mean that in one of two ways:

- 1 - It may describe the man who says that he has no *responsibility* for his sin.
- 2 - Or it may describe the man who claims that he can sin and *take no harm*.

"It is John's insistence that, when [someone] has sinned, excuses and self-justification are irrelevant. The only thing that will meet the situation is humble and penitent confession to God and, if need be, to [others]."

Honesty and truthfulness require us to acknowledge our sin, and to confess so that God may forgive us. The word for 'sin' in the New Testament is a Greek word that means to "miss the mark." It comes from the sport of archery, where you aim your arrow at a target... if you miss the target, that is *sin*.



The target is obedience to God. Jesus puts it this way: "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (John 15:10). Can any of us can honestly claim that we have always kept all of God's commands? That we have never missed the target?

The surprising, and welcoming news, as Barclay explains it, is that

we can depend on God *in his righteousness* to forgive us if we confess our sins. On the face of it, we might well have thought that God *in his righteousness* would have been much more likely to condemn than to forgive. But the point is that God, because he is righteous, never breaks his word; and Scripture is full of the promise of mercy to the man who comes to him with penitent heart. God has promised that he will never despise the contrite heart [see Psalm 51] and he will not break his word.

God knows our heart as well as our actions, and when we claim that "we have not sinned" (verse 10) "we make him out to be a liar." This is John's strongest criticism, and his harshest judgment -- we should not let our ignorance, our pride, or our self-righteousness cause us to call God a liar! To do so means that God's word is not in us.

Barclays succinctly summarizes this whole matter of sin, repentance, and sanctification:

The essence of the Christian life is first to realize our sin; and then to go to God for that forgiveness which can wipe out the past and for that cleansing which can make the future new.

Chapter 2 - Love and Hate

We shall consider this 2nd chapter in four sections, beginning with verses 1-11:

1 My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have an advocate with the Father—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2 He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

3 We know that we have come to know him if we keep his commands. 4 Whoever says, “I know him,” but does not do what he commands is a liar, and the truth is not in that person. 5 But if anyone obeys his word, love for God is truly made complete in them. This is how we know we are in him: 6 Whoever claims to live in him must live as Jesus did.

7 Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. 8 Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and in you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.

9 Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates a brother or sister is still in the darkness. 10 Anyone who loves their brother and sister lives in the light, and there is nothing in them to make them stumble. 11 But anyone who hates a brother or sister is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness. They do not know where they are going, because the darkness has blinded them.

Having laid the foundation, as it were, in the first chapter, John now goes on to address his “dear children” (‘little children’ in some versions). His affection and compassion for his readers is clear -- as Barclay expresses it: “he has nothing but tenderness for those who are his little children in the faith.”

Barclay describes very well the attitude and character of John that comes across in his words:

He is writing to tell them that they must not sin but he does not scold. There is no cutting edge in his voice; he seeks to love them into goodness. In this opening address there is the yearning, affectionate tenderness of a pastor for people whom he has known for long in all their wayward foolishness and still loves.”

John encourages his children not to sin, but assures them of forgiveness when they do. He describes Jesus as “the Righteous One” and refers to him as our “advocate with the Father” and the “atoning sacrifice” for our sins. We need to explore these two references to get a fuller understanding of what is meant.

The word translated ‘advocate’ comes from the same Greek word that is translated ‘comforter’ or ‘helper’ in the Gospel of John (e.g. John 14:26 and 16:7). The word is *paraklētos* and it means ‘someone who is called to one’s side’ to give support or to

plead one's case. This is how Jesus explains the Holy Spirit, as one who will continue what Jesus himself came to do -- to come alongside us to give support.

The word 'propitiation' in the King James Version is rendered "atoning sacrifice" here in the New International Version. It comes from the Greek word *hilasmos*, which the Jews would readily understand but we may need some explanation of. As Barclay explains: "It is to bring a sacrifice or to perform a ritual whereby a god, offended by sin, is placated." He continues that "the great basic truth behind this word is that it is through Jesus Christ that [our] fellowship with God is first restored and then maintained." Jesus is the 'sacrifice' which atones for our sin. Atonement is the putting right, the making amends for -- Jesus' sacrifice make us 'at one' with God.

John then proceeds to challenge his children to recognize that they have to obey Jesus' commands and God's word -- this is the evidence that "we are in him." It is put very clearly in verse 6: "Whoever claims to be in him must live as Jesus did."

The two ethical principles here are:

- 1 - **knowledge** involves obedience -- the more we know of God's will we more we try to be in it;
- 2 - **union** involves imitation -- the better we know Christ the more we want to be like him.

John says he is not giving a new command, but reminding readers that this command has been around from the 'get go' -- from the beginning. Love for God, and the resultant obedience to his word, has always been what God requires of us. See Deuteronomy 6, verses 4 and 5:

"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord *is* one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your strength.

Yet this is a new command because it is in Jesus ("the true light" that is "already shining") that we see *how* we are to live... *how* to get out of the darkness and walk in the light. This is an echo of what Jesus told his disciples when he said he was giving them a new commandment -- it was an old commandment, with the 'newness' being in following *his example* -- when he said:

A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as *I have loved you*, that you also love one another. By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another." (John 13:34-35)

We need to understand what John meant when he said that "the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining." In the context in which John wrote, at the end of the first century, the thinking about Jesus's return was changing from the earlier expectation that he would return 'soon'. Barclay explains: "To John the Second Coming of Christ is not one sudden dramatic event but a process in which the darkness is steadily being defeated by the light; and the end of the process will be a

world in which the darkness is totally defeated and the light triumphant." Walking in the light means just that... *walking*. And the only way to walk is one step at a time.

The hypocrisy of saying one thing and doing another -- claiming to be in the light but stumbling around in darkness -- is revisited. We will see this again before we leave this letter, and we first saw it in chapter 1, verse 6:

If we claim to have fellowship with him and yet walk in the darkness,
we lie and do not live out the truth.

The need to "walk in the light" is stressed, as it will be again. This metaphor speaks to:

- our enlightenment -- what we *know* of Jesus that shapes our beliefs and values;
- our behaviour -- what guides our thinking, that leads to our actions;
- our clarity -- what 'shines' on our path, so that we can 'see' the way to go.

And all of this is framed in the context of our relationships with each other: how we treat and get along with each reflects whether or not we are "in the light" or we are still "in darkness." We are "in the light" when we love our brothers and sisters. Again this echoes Jesus (see Mark 12:28-31), who quoted from the Law that we must "love the Lord our God" (Deuteronomy 6:5) and we must "love our neighbours as we love ourselves" (Leviticus 18:19).

We turn now the second section of this 2nd chapter, namely verses 12-17:

12 I am writing to you, dear children,
because your sins have been forgiven on account of his name.

13 I am writing to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I am writing to you, young men,
because you have overcome the evil one.

14 I write to you, dear children,
because you know the Father.

I write to you, fathers,
because you know him who is from the beginning.

I write to you, young men,
because you are strong,
and the word of God lives in you,
and you have overcome the evil one.

15 Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, love for the Father is not in them. 16 For everything in the world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life—comes not from the Father but from the world.

17 The world and its desires pass away, but whoever does the will of God lives forever.

John now stresses that he is including everyone in his message... so he names several of the groups -- the 'children' the 'fathers' and the 'young men' -- who are meant to be representative of the entire assembly. You will note that he refers to each group twice, saying the same thing, but repeating it for emphasis. He wants to ensure that everyone in the fellowship understands that what he is saying in this letter is relevant to them all. It is also a way of encouraging them in the important things they need to remember:

- their forgiveness of sins
- their knowledge of God
- their victory over the devil
- their strength because they abide in the Word

The instruction not to love the world must be seen in context. As Barclay explains:

The world in this passage does not mean the world in general, for God loved the world which he had made; it means the world which, in fact, had forsaken the God who made it.

It so happened that there was a factor in the situation of John's people which made the circumstances even more perilous. It is clear that, although they might be unpopular, they were not undergoing persecution. They were, therefore, under the great and dangerous temptation to compromise with the world. It is always difficult to be different, and it was specially difficult for them.

John highlights three things that illustrate how we can 'love the world' in ways that are contrary to God's world:

1. the lust of the flesh
 - this means to judge everything by material standards; to see everything through the lens of the senses
2. the lust of the eyes
 - the covetousness of wanting things you see -- everything is not for everyone
3. the pride of life
 - an attachment to the things of the world that are transient, not of eternal value

What we need to focus on are the things that come from, and lead us to, God. The eternal is far more valuable than the temporal, as Jesus reminds us:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19-21)

Let's now consider the third section of chapter 2, verses 18-25:

18 Dear children, this is the last hour; and as you have heard that the antichrist is coming, even now many antichrists have come. This is how we know it is the last hour. 19 They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

20 But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth. 21 I do not write to you because you do not know the truth, but because you do know it and because no lie comes from the truth. 22 Who is the liar? It is whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a person is the antichrist—denying the Father and the Son. 23 No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

24 As for you, see that what you have heard from the beginning remains in you. If it does, you also will remain in the Son and in the Father. 25 And this is what he promised us—eternal life.

In this section John introduces two concepts that require our careful consideration:

- ***last hour***

The idea of last days runs all through the Bible, and its meaning develops through Israel's history and experience. In the early books of the Old Testament the 'last days' described the time when Israel would enter the Promised Land. Later, in the time of the prophets, the 'last days' were the time of the full obedience of Israel to the supremacy of God. In the time between the Old and New Testament the term 'last days' became associated with the 'Day of the Lord' -- this would be a time of terror, of cosmic dissolution and of judgment... the birth-pangs of the new age. Barclay describes what John means this way:

The last hour does not mean a time of annihilation whose end will be a great nothingness as there was at the beginning. In biblical thought the last time is the end of one age and the beginning of another. It is *last* in the sense that things as they are pass away; but it leads not to world obliteration but to world re-creation...

The conflict between good and evil never stops; therefore, the choice never stops; therefore, in a very real sense every hour is the last hour.

- ***Antichrist***

This specific term is found only in the New Testament in the Letters of John -- here, and in 1 John 4:3 and also in 2 John 7 -- but, says Barclay, "it is the expression of an idea which is as old as religion itself."

The prefix 'anti' means *against* or *opposed to* -- and there are two possible meanings of 'antichrist' as used here:

- (i) the opponent of Christ
- (ii) the one who seeks to put himself in the place of Christ

Barclay offers this simple way of understanding the concept:

Christ is the incarnation of God and goodness, and
Antichrist is the incarnation of the devil and evil.

The church had been forewarned that in the 'last days' false teachers would appear -- a few examples:

1. **2 Thessalonians 2:3-4** "will oppose God... proclaiming himself to be God"
2. **Acts 20:29-30** "men will arise and distort the truth"
3. **Mark 13:6** "many will come in my name... and deceive many"
4. **Matthew 24:5** "claiming, 'I am the Messiah,' and will deceive many"

John had a special view of the situation. According to Barclay, John

did not think of Antichrist as one single individual figure but rather as a power of falsehood speaking in and through the false teachers. Just as the Holy Spirit was inspiring the true teachers and the true prophets, so there was an evil spirit inspiring the false teachers and the false prophets...

The great interest and relevance of this is that for John *the battleground was in the mind*. The spirit of Antichrist was struggling with the Spirit of God for the possession of men's minds. What makes this so significant is that we can see exactly this process at work today.

Those who were 'anti Christ' had left the fellowship of believers, because, according to John, "If they belonged to us, they would have remained with us." This may literally mean some had physically left, but it may equally mean that some had left 'spiritually' and were no longer in the fellowship of *light* and *truth*. John sees "in the Church a time of sifting," as Barclay puts it -- their true colours have come to light and their 'going' away from the truth showed that they 'did not belong.'

John encourages those who remain (those to whom he is writing) to be strong, and to "remain" in the Son and the Father by letting what they have been taught "remain" in them. It is through the anointing they received from the Holy One (verses 20 & 21) that they are equipped with knowledge, and this knowledge is truth. They are not to be deceived by the liars who have strayed away from the truth -- the liars are those who deny Jesus is the Christ (verses 21 & 22). The title 'Christ' is the Greek word *Christos* which is the translation of the Hebrew word for *Messiah*, or the *Anointed One*. A clear connection is being made between Jesus (the Anointed One) and the teaching these believers had already received (the anointing of the holy One). This is an oblique reference to the *Gnostics* or *Docetists*, who denied that Jesus was truly human, and therefore could not be the Messiah or the 'Anointed One'. "Whoever denies that Jesus is the Christ" is *the liar*, is *the antichrist* (verse 22). We will confront these heresies later in this letter, and discuss them in more detail then.

Barclay gives a good summary of what John is teaching in this passage -- he says:
we have two tests by which to judge any new teaching offered to us:

- (i) There is an *external* test. All teaching must be in accordance with the tradition handed down to us in Scripture and in the Church.
- (ii) There is an *internal* test. All teaching must undergo the test of the Holy Spirit witnessing within in our hearts.

And, finally, the fourth section of the 2nd chapter, verses 26-29:

26 I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. 27 As for you, the anointing you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit—just as it has taught you, remain in him.

28 And now, dear children, continue in him, so that when he appears we may be confident and unashamed before him at his coming.

29 If you know that he is righteous, you know that everyone who does what is right has been born of him.

Repeating for emphasis, John reminds his readers that they have the truth within them -- they have all that they need, and they do not need any false teachers bringing them counterfeit doctrine. This passage echoes the Gospel of John chapter 15, where we Jesus instructs his disciples:

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.

Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me... If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit... If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (verses 3-7)

The best way to be ready for Christ's return is to live with him every day -- to abide or remain in him consistently. If we do then we will be "confident and unashamed before him at his coming." In the last verse of this chapter John reminds his 'dear children' that the only way for someone to prove that they are abiding/remaining in Christ is by the righteousness of their life. "The profession someone makes will always be proved or disproved by their practice" (Barclay).

Chapter 3 - The Christian Life

We shall consider this 3rd chapter in three sections, beginning with verses 1-10:

1 See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! The reason the world does not know us is that it did not know him. 2 Dear friends, now we are children of God, and what we will be has not yet been made known. But we know that when Christ appears, we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is. 3 All who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure.

4 Everyone who sins breaks the law; in fact, sin is lawlessness. 5 But you know that he appeared so that he might take away our sins. And in him is no sin. 6 No one who lives in him keeps on sinning. No one who continues to sin has either seen him or known him.

7 Dear children, do not let anyone lead you astray. The one who does what is right is righteous, just as he is righteous. 8 The one who does what is sinful is of the devil, because the devil has been sinning from the beginning. The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil's work. 9 No one who is born of God will continue to sin, because God's seed remains in them; they cannot go on sinning, because they have been born of God. 10 This is how we know who the children of God are and who the children of the devil are: Anyone who does not do what is right is not God's child, nor is anyone who does not love their brother and sister.

William Barclay says of the first 3 verses, that it may well be "that the best illumination of this passage is the Scottish Paraphrase of it" -- which he quotes:

Behold the amazing gift of love the Father has bestow'd
On us, the sinful sons of men, to call us sons of God!
Concealed as yet this honour lies, by this dark world unknown,
A world that knew not when he came, even God's eternal Son.
High is the rank we now possess, but higher still we shall rise;
Though what we shall hereafter be is hid from mortal eyes.
Our souls, we know, when he appears, shall bear his image bright;
For all his glory, full disclosed, shall open to our sight.
A hope so great, and so divine, may trials well endure;
And purge the soul from sense and sin, as Christ himself is pure.

John makes the point that believers are not merely 'called' the children of God, but actually 'are' the children of God. Everyone, by nature, "is the *creature* of God, but it is by grace that [we] become the *child* of God." (Barclay)

John then turns his attention to the heretics -- don't let them "lead you astray," he says in verse 7. These are the **Gnostics**... those who do "not do what is right" and therefore are not God's children (verse 10). Barclay gives a good summary of what the Gnostics believed about sin and how they justified it:

They said that the body was evil and that, therefore, there was no harm in sating its lusts, because what happened to it was of no importance. They said that the truly supernatural man was so armoured with the Spirit that he could sin to his heart's content and take no harm from it. They even said that the true Gnostic was under obligation both to scale the heights and to plumb the depths so that he might be truly said to know all things.

John disabuses his hearers of this false teaching by stressing the truth, and by describing what they need to put into practice. Barclay describes what John says as "a kind of analysis of sin" and breaks it down thus:

- (i) He tells us *what sin is*... to obey oneself rather than to obey God.
- (ii) He tells us *what sin does*... it undoes the work of Christ.
- (iii) He tells us *why sin is*... it comes from the failure to abide in Christ.
- (iv) He tells us *whence sin comes*.... from the devil... a power hostile to God.
- (v) He tells us *how sin is conquered*... Christ destroyed the works of the devil.

Verse 9 is difficult to interpret, and it seems to suggest that believers are *unable* to sin after accepting Christ as Saviour. However, if we understand God's 'seed' to be His word then it is easier to accept -- while God's word remains/abides in the believer, guiding and strengthening values and behaviour, s/he will not easily give in to sin. Peter gives this explanation of the word of God identified as the 'imperishable seed' of God in 1 Peter 1:23:

For you have been born again, not of perishable *seed*, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring *word* of God.

Verse 10 echoes Jesus' teaching (in John 13:35): "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." The evidence is in the action!

Now we consider the second section of this 3rd chapter, namely verses 11-18:

11 For this is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another. 12 Do not be like Cain, who belonged to the evil one and murdered his brother. And why did he murder him? Because his own actions were evil and his brother's were righteous. 13 Do not be surprised, my brothers and sisters, if the world hates you. 14 We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love each other. Anyone who does not love remains in death. 15 Anyone who hates a brother or sister is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life residing in him.

16 This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters. 17 If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or speech but with actions and in truth.

Emphasizing that this is not *new* teaching, John reassures his readers that this is the same message God has always given: Love one another. Unlike the 'new' message of the heretics -- that it didn't matter how you treated yourself or others -- God's message is that love is required. And, John reminds his *dear children*, love requires sacrifice. How do we know what *love* is? "Jesus Christ laid down his life for us" (verse 16). And we should follow Jesus' example. Though we may not literally have to lay down our life, we do have to share our resources and help each other. Love is only authentic and genuine when it is demonstrated -- don't just talk the talk, but walk the walk!

The opposite of this -- the actions of those who 'belong to the evil one' -- produces hate. Hate kills... hence John describes those who do not show love as "murderers." Not that they are literally killers, but they can 'kill' the spirit and drain the 'life' out of those they hate. Those who believe in, and follow after, Jesus have moved 'from death to life' -- from darkness to light, from lies to truth.

The "parenthesis" in verse 12 (as Barclay refers to it) and the consequence of it in verse 13, illustrate another truth. "Righteousness always provokes hostility in the minds of those whose actions are evil... Wherever the Christian is, even though he speak no word, he acts as the conscience of society; and for that very reason the world will often hate him."

We turn now to the third section of chapter 3, verses 19-24:

19 This is how we know that we belong to the truth and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence: 20 If our hearts condemn us, we know that God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything. 21 Dear friends, if our hearts do not condemn us, we have confidence before God 22 and receive from him anything we ask, because we keep his commands and do what pleases him. 23 And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. 24 The one who keeps God's commands lives in him, and he in them. And this is how we know that he lives in us: We know it by the Spirit he gave us.

John references another biblical characteristic of those who follow and obey God -- their *heart* is right. King David reminds us of how important this is when he prays "create in me a pure heart, O God" and acknowledges that God desires from us a

“broken and contrite heart” (Psalm 51:10 & 17). Our hearts will guide us -- they will be “at rest” in God and we will be confident, or they will “condemn” us.

“God knows everything,” John reminds his readers. And our heart is our spiritual compass to know where God is leading us, and to know whether or not we are following. God empowers those who are obedient, who “keep his commands and do what pleases him.”

Again addressing the heretics, though indirectly, John explains (in verse 23) that God’s *command* comes in two parts, as Barclay elucidates:

(i) We must believe in the *name* of his Son, Jesus Christ.

Here we have that use of the word *name* which is peculiar to the biblical writers. It does not mean simply the name by which a person is called; it means the whole nature and character of that person as far as it is known to us...So, then, to believe in the *name* of Jesus Christ, means to believe in the nature and character of Jesus Christ.

(ii) We must *love one another*, even as he gave us his commandment (John 13:34).

We must love each other with that same selfless, sacrificial, forgiving love with which Jesus loved us.

When we put these two commandments together, we find the great truth that the Christian life depends on right belief and right conduct combined. We cannot have the one without the other. There can be no such thing as a Christian theology without a Christian ethic; and equally there can be no such thing as a Christian ethic without a Christian theology. Our belief is not real belief unless it issues in action; and our action has neither sanction nor dynamic unless it is based on belief.

Chapter 4 - God is Love

We shall consider this 4th chapter in three sections, beginning with verses 1-6:

1 Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. 2 This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, 3 but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world.

4 You, dear children, are from God and have overcome them, because the one who is in you is greater than the one who is in the world. 5 They are from the world and therefore speak from the viewpoint of the world, and the world listens to them. 6 We are from God, and whoever knows God listens to us; but whoever is not from God does not listen to us. This is how we recognize the Spirit of truth and the spirit of falsehood.

"In the early church there was a surging life of the Spirit which brought its own perils. There were so many and such diverse spiritual manifestations that some kind of test was necessary," according to Barclay. We find an example of this in 1 Corinthians 14, where Paul challenges the congregation in Corinth to behave decently and in order. There should not be confusion with many people claiming to be speaking in tongues through the Spirit and no one knowing what they are saying. The church should not sound like the market place! God will enable them to interpret, or give others the gift of interpretation, Paul says, if it is really His truth being declared.

John encourages his readers to "test the spirits" of those who come purporting to be prophets and teachers. He simply and clearly states how they can recognize a spirit in line with God's Spirit -- these teachers will openly acknowledge that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (verse 2). This is a direct attack on the **Gnostics** (the spirit of the antichrist) who taught that Jesus did not come in the flesh because spirit and flesh cannot co-exist. To deny the reality of the incarnation (that the divine Jesus was also a human) has definite consequences, which Barclay outlines:

- (i) It is to deny that Jesus can ever be our example. If he was not in a real sense a man, living under the same conditions as men, he cannot show men how to live.
- (ii) It is to deny that Jesus can be the High Priest who opens the way to God. The true High Priest, as the writer to the Hebrews saw, must be like us in all things, knowing our infirmities and our temptations (*Hebrews 4:14-15*).
- (iii) It is to deny that Jesus can in any real sense be Saviour. To save men he had to identify himself with the men he came to save.

- (iv) It is to deny the salvation of the body. Christian teaching is quite clear that salvation is the salvation of the whole man. The body as well as the soul is saved. To deny the incarnation is to deny the possibility that the body can ever become the temple of the Holy Spirit.
- (v) By far the most serious and terrible thing is that it is to deny that there can ever be any real union between God and man. If the spirit is altogether good and the body is altogether evil, God and man can never meet, so long as man is man. They might meet when man has sloughed off the body and become a *disembodied* spirit. But the great truth of the incarnation is that here and now there can be real communion between God and man.

Nothing in Christianity is more central than the reality of the manhood of Jesus Christ.

John reassures his readers that they have the victory and will overcome because "the one who is in them, is greater than the one who is in the world" (verse 4). As Barclay puts it, "All that the Christian has to do is remember the truth he already knows and cling to it." Again John contrasts those who are from the 'world' with those who are from God, and urges the believers to test the teachers by their fidelity to the truth.

Barclay reminds us of John's teaching and identifies a problem that could emerge from this kind of thinking:

We have seen again and again that it is characteristic of [John] to see things in terms of black and white. His thinking does not deal in shades. On the one side there is the man whose source and origin is God and who can hear the truth; on the other side there is the man whose source and origin is the world and who is incapable of hearing the truth. There emerges a problem, which very likely John did not even think of. Are there people to whom all preaching is quite useless? Are there people whose defences can never be penetrated, whose deafness can never hear, and whose minds are for ever shut to the invitation and command of Jesus Christ?

The answer must be that there are no limits to the grace of God and that there is such a person as the Holy Spirit. It is the lesson of life that the love of God can break every barrier down. It is true that man can resist; it is, maybe, true that a man can resist even to the end. But what is also true is that Christ is always knocking at the door of every heart, and it is possible for any man to hear the voice of Christ, even above the many voices of the world.

Now we turn to the second section of this 4th chapter, namely verses 7-16a:

7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. 9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that

we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.

13 This is how we know that we live in him and he in us: He has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in them and they in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us.

The emphasis in this passage is on *love* -- the love between God and us, and the love we must have for each other -- as well as on the work of *Jesus*. Let's unpack these two emphases:

1. **Love** -- John teaches that love:

- a) has its origin in God (verse 7) because God *is* love (verse 8)
- b) it is only by knowing God that we learn to love, and it is only by loving that we learn to know God (verse 7 and 8)
- c) God's love is demonstrated in Jesus -- in Jesus we see a love that gives all, and a love that is totally undeserved (verse 9)
- d) it is only by love that God is known -- we cannot see God, but we experience the effect of God in our lives (verse 12)

Barclays says "the greatest single statement about God in the whole Bible" is in this passage: **God is love** (verse 8). This definition of God, he suggests, "unlocks doors" and "answers questions" -- it explains:

- **Creation** -- creation is essential to God's very nature... "Love must have someone to love and someone to love it."
- **Free Will** -- unless love is a free response it is not love. "God, by deliberate act of self-limitation, had to endow us with free will."
- **Providence** -- God might "have created the universe, wound it up, set it going and left it. But, because God is love, his creating act is followed by his constant care."
- **Redemption** -- "the very fact that God is love meant that he had to seek and save that which was lost."
- **Life Beyond** -- "the fact that God is love makes it certain that the chances and changes of life have not the last word."

2. **Jesus** -- John teaches that Jesus is:

- a) the *bringer of life* -- God sent him that we might live through him (verse 9)
- b) the *restorer of the lost* -- God sent him to be an atoning sacrifice (verse 10)

c) the *Saviour of the world* (verse 14) -- he enables us "to face time and to meet eternity"

d) is the *Son of God* (verse 15) -- he is in a unique relationship with God

In this passage we have a clear description of the role and function of the **Trinity** -- God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit -- see verses 13 and 14.

- **God the Father** loves us, and has shown his love by sending his Son.
- **God the Son** is our Saviour, the atoning sacrifice for our sins.
- **God the Holy Spirit** has been given to us to guide us to live like Jesus.

We consider the third section of chapter 4, verses 16b-21:

God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in them. 17 This is how love is made complete among us so that we will have confidence on the day of judgment: In this world we are like Jesus. 18 There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.

19 We love because he first loved us. 20 Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. 21 And he has given us this command: Anyone who loves God must also love their brother and sister.

Here in the last part of verse 16 John repeats the same simple yet profound definition of God that he gave in verse 8: "God is love." And he identifies "living in love" as the same as "living in God" -- the evidence that we know God and live His way must be demonstrated. We have learned how to love from God who loved us first (verse 19), and this must be evidenced in our lives. He condemns as hypocrites those who claim to love God but do not love their brothers and sisters.

In this discussion of *love*, John raises two more significant points:

- I. **Love drives out fear** -- when love moves in, fear moves out.

"So long as we regard God as the Judge, the King, the Law-giver, there can be nothing in our heart but fear for in the face of such a God we can expect nothing but punishment. But once we know God's true nature, fear is swallowed up in love. The fear that remains is the fear of grieving his love for us." (Barclay)

This is an echo of what God said through the prophet Isaiah (Is. 26:3) -- quoted here from the Amplified Version:

You will keep in perfect and constant peace the one whose mind is steadfast [that is, committed and focused on You—in both inclination and character], because he trusts and takes refuge in You [with hope and confident expectation].

This is also a partial explanation of what Jesus meant when He instructed his disciples to “be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matthew 5:48). To be ‘perfect’ is to become more like God -- again, the Amplified Version expands it for us:

You, therefore, will **be perfect** [growing into spiritual maturity both in mind and character, actively integrating godly values into **your** daily life], **as your** heavenly **Father** is **perfect**.

II. the *love of God* and the *love of humans* are entwined.

Barclay quotes C. H. Dodd, who observed: “The energy of love discharges itself along lines which form a triangle, whose points are God, self, and neighbour.” Therefore, the only way to prove that we love God is to love those whom God loves. And the Bible tells us that God loves all that He has made -- see Psalm 145, verse 9:

The Lord is good to all; he has compassion on all he has made.

Jesus, in what we commonly call the *Sermon on the Mount*, addresses this very subject -- see Matthew 5:43-48:

“You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.

Barclay puts this teaching succinctly:

The only way to prove that God is *within our hearts* is constantly to show the love of people *within our lives*.

Chapter 5 - The Real God

We shall consider this 5th chapter in four sections, beginning with verses 1-5:

1 Everyone who believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves the father loves his child as well. 2 This is how we know that we love the children of God: by loving God and carrying out his commands. 3 In fact, this is love for God: to keep his commands. And his commands are not burdensome, 4 for everyone born of God overcomes the world. This is the victory that has overcome the world, even our faith. 5 Who is it that overcomes the world? Only the one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God.

When Jesus was asked "What is the greatest commandment?" (see Matthew 22:35-36) he responded by quoting two portions of the Law:

Jesus replied: "'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:35-36)

This 'first and greatest commandment' is found in Deuteronomy 6:5:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. [*Note: Jesus replaced 'strength' with 'mind'*]

And 'the second' is found in Leviticus 19:18:

Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.

John, in this Letter, is again echoing Jesus in explaining the Law... all that God requires of us is fulfilled in our love for God and for each other. He stresses this point again, and again, and again. And here in verse 1 he injects 'family love' into the equation -- if we love the Father, we must love His children. Barclay gives a fuller explanation of this concept:

The Christian undergoes the experience of being reborn; the father is God; and the Christian is bound to love God for all he has done for his soul. But birth is always into a family; and the Christian is reborn into the family of God. As it was for Jesus, so it is for him -- those who do the will of God, as he himself does, become his mother, his sisters and his brothers (Mark 3:35). If, then, the Christian loves God the Father who begat him, he must also love the other children whom God has begotten. His love of God and his love of his Christian brothers and sisters must be parts of the same love, so closely interlocked that they can never be separated.

Stressing again that obedience is the only proof of love -- that love for God must be evidenced in 'carrying out His commands' -- John says a surprising thing: God's commands are "not burdensome" (verse 3). Surprising because his readers had already experienced persecution, faced challenges, and now they have false teachers

to deal with... all of which would have made it difficult for them to be obedient to God's commands. John is probably remembering that Jesus told his disciples that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (see Matthew 11:28-30). This was in contrast to the Scribes and Pharisees whom Jesus accused of making obedience a heavy burden. He said of these hypocrites in Matthew 23:2-4:

“The teachers of the law and the Pharisees sit in Moses' seat. So you must be careful to do everything they tell you. But do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach. They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders, but they themselves are not willing to lift a finger to move them.

How does obedience to God's command through Christ become easier than obedience to the Law? In answering his own question as to how this is to be explained, Barclay suggests three answers:

- (i) It is the way of God never to lay a commandment on any man without also giving him the strength to carry it out... God does not give us his commandments and then go away and leave us to ourselves. He is there by our side to enable us to carry out what he has commanded.
- (ii) Our response to God must be the response of love; and for love no duty is too hard and no task too great... What would be an impossible sacrifice, if a stranger demanded it, becomes a willing gift when love needs it... [Christ's] commandments are not a burden but a privilege and an opportunity to show our love.
- (iii) There is something in the Christian which makes him able to conquer the world. The *kosmos* is the world apart from God and in opposition to him. That which enables us to conquer the *kosmos* is *faith*.

John defines this conquering faith as the belief that Jesus is the Son of God. It is a belief in the Incarnation. Why should that be so victory-giving? If we believe in the incarnation, it means that we believe that in Jesus God entered the world and took our human life upon himself. If he did that, it means that he *cared* enough for men to take upon himself the limitations of humanity, which is the act of love that passes human understanding... Faith in the incarnation is the conviction that God shares and God cares.

Now we consider the second section of this 5th chapter -- verses 6-13:

6 This is the one who came by water and blood—Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth. 7 For there are three that testify: 8 the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement. 9 We accept human testimony, but God's testimony is greater because it is the testimony of God, which he has given about his Son. 10 Whoever believes in the Son of God accepts this testimony. Whoever does not believe God has made him out to be a liar, because they have not believed the testimony God has given about his Son.

11 And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. 12 Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life. 13 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.

This passage has a legalistic bent, evidenced by the word 'testimony' appearing repeatedly, as well as the word 'testify' a couple times, and the word 'agreement' once. And this is not the first time John uses the legal context of multiple testimony to strengthen his case -- we have several examples in the Gospel of John of witnesses supporting the claims of Jesus:

- John the Baptist testifies about Jesus (John 1:15 and 32-34)
- Jesus' deeds are a witness to him (John 5:36)
- The Scriptures testify to Jesus (John 5:39)
- The Father who sent him has testified to Jesus (John 5:37-38)
- The Spirit is a witness to Jesus (John 15:26)

John is again rebuking the Gnostic heretics by making a case for Jesus as Messiah, only now he frames it in legal terms. Reiterating the truth that Jesus was truly divine while also being fully human, John describes the Messiah as the one who "came by water and blood" (verse 6). And, he emphasizes, not by water only, but by water and blood. "It is clear," says Barclay, "that the words *water* and *blood* in connection with Jesus had for John a special mystical and symbolic meaning." In the Gospel of John we read this about Jesus on the Cross:

But when they came to Jesus and found that he was already dead, they did not break his legs. Instead, one of the soldiers pierced Jesus' side with a spear, bringing a sudden flow of blood and water. The man who saw it has given testimony, and his testimony is true. He knows that he tells the truth, and he testifies so that you also may believe. (John 19:33-35)

John, who gives this testimony, describes this detail because it reinforces the truth that both the baptism of Jesus (water) and the death of Jesus (blood) are essential parts of his Messiahship. Barclay elucidates how he is using this against the Gnostics:

We have seen again and again that behind this letter lies the heresy of Gnosticism. And we have also seen that Gnosticism, believing that Spirit was altogether good and matter altogether evil, denied that God came in the flesh. So they had a belief of which Irenaeus tell us connected with the name of Cerinthus, one of their principal representatives and an exact contemporary of John. Cerinthus taught that at the baptism the divine Christ descended into the man Jesus in the form of a dove; Jesus, allied as it were with the Christ who had descended upon him, brought to men the message of the God who had hitherto been unknown and lived in perfect virtue; then the Christ departed from the man Jesus and returned to glory, and it was only the man Jesus who was crucified on Calvary and afterward resurrected.

It is clear that such teaching robs the life and death of Jesus of value for us. By seeking to protect God from contact with human pain, it removes him from the act of redemption.

What John is saying is that the Cross is an essential part of the meaning of Jesus and and that God was in the death of Jesus every bit as much as he was in his life.

John refreshes his readers' memory on the legal matter of testimony and witnesses. They would be familiar with the scriptures relating to this, particularly Deuteronomy 19:15, which states:

One witness is not enough to convict anyone accused of any crime or offense they may have committed. A matter must be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

He stresses that on the matter of the baptism and the death of Jesus being essential to the doctrine of the incarnation, there are "three that testify" and the "three are in agreement" (verse 7). The fact that this is the testimony of God gives it even greater credibility, and so strengthens his case against the Gnostics.

Barclays suggest that with the paragraph comprised of verses 11-13 the letter proper comes to an end -- "what follows is in the nature of a postscript," he says. "The end is a statement that the essence of the Christian life is *eternal life*."

The Greek word used for *eternal* means more than simply lasting forever, or never ending. It speaks of the qualities of existence that imply a blessed life. The only one who this term can be properly applied to is God, as Barclays observes:

In the real sense of the term it is God alone who possesses and inhabits eternity. *Eternal life* is, therefore, nothing other than the *life of God himself*. What we are promised is that here and now there can be given us a share in the very life of God.

The nature of God informs us what eternal life is like -- if it is the very life of God it is:

- free of conflict . . . full of serenity
- free of fear . . . full of peace
- free of frustration . . . full of harmony
- free of sin . . . full of holiness
- free of hatred . . . full of love
- free of death . . . full of life

Barclays sums it up this way:

It means a life which is indestructible because it has in it the indestructibility of God himself.

Let's look now at the third section of this 5th chapter, namely verses 14-17:

14 This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him.

16 If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should pray and God will give them life. I refer to those whose sin does not lead to death. There is a sin that leads to death. I am not saying that you should pray about that. 17 All wrongdoing is sin, and there is sin that does not lead to death.

Here, in verses 14 and 15, are "set down both the basis and the principle of prayer," according to Barclay.

- (i) The *basis* of prayer is the simple fact that God listens to our prayers... He is always listening, more ready to hear than we are to pray. We never need to force our way into his presence or compel him to pay attention. He is waiting for us to come.
- (ii) The *principle* of prayer is that to be answered it must be *in accordance with the will of God*. Three times in his writings John lays down what might be called the conditions of prayer:
 - (a) He says that *obedience* is a condition of prayer. We receive whatever we ask because we keep his commandments (*1 John 3:22*).
 - (b) He says that *remaining in Christ* is a condition of prayer. If we abide in him and his words abide in us, we will ask what we will and it will be done for us (*John 15:7*). The closer we live to Christ, the more we shall pray aright; and the more we pray aright, the greater the answer we receive.
 - (c) He says that to *pray in his name* is a condition of prayer. If we ask anything in his name, he will do it (*John 14:14*). The ultimate test of any request is, can we say to Jesus, "Give me this for *your* sake and in *your* name?"

Effective prayer is always seeking God's will, not imposing ours. It can never be to ask for that which is contrary to God's will. Jesus prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me. Yet not as I will, but as you will" (Matthew 26:39). He taught his disciples (and, by extension, us) to pray to the Father, "your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" (Matthew 6:10). Barclay sharpens the focus for us:

Here is something on which to ponder. We are so apt to think that prayer is asking God for what we want, whereas prayer is asking God for what he wants. Prayer is not only talking to God, even more it is listening to him.

The next 2 verses are problematic, in that they do not seem to clearly express what John wishes to say. The original Greek is clumsy, and therefore all attempts to

translate it are somewhat muddled. Let's see what we can make of it, based on what we know from other sources and what we know of John.

Having addressed prayer in general, John now turns to prayer for others, especially those involved in specific situations. Intercessory prayer is commended and, indeed, it is instructed several times in the New Testament, for example:

1 Thessalonians 5:25 -- Paul urges the believers to "pray for us"

Hebrews 13:18 -- again the request to "pray for us"

James 5:14 -- the elders should be called to pray over the sick

1 Timothy 2:1 -- intercessions should be made for all people

In addition to the general principle of intercession -- that is, holding others up in our prayers -- John speaks of praying specifically for the person who commits a sin "that does not lead to death" (verse 16). What kind of sin is this? Barclay begins his explanation by referencing the Jewish tradition and understanding of 'sin' -- they distinguished two kinds of sin:

There were the sins which a man committed unwittingly or, at least, not deliberately. These were sins which a man might commit in ignorance, or when he was swept away by some over-mastering impulse, or in some moment of strong emotion when his passions were too strong for the leash of the will to hold.

On the other hand, there were the sins of the high hand and haughty heart, the sins which a man deliberately committed, the sins in which he defiantly took his own way in spite of the known will of God for him.

It was for the first kind of sin that sacrifice atoned; but for the sins of the haughty heart and the high hand no sacrifice could atone.

So the sin that 'does not lead to death' must be sin that can be forgiven, wrong-doing for which atonement can be made. This is in contrast to the sin that "does lead to death" -- referred to as "mortal sin" in some versions of the Bible. This would be the sin that falls into the 'high hand and haughty heart' category.

There were some in the early days of the church who held that there was no forgiveness for the sins committed after baptism, which meant such sins could lead to death in that the condemnation would not be taken away. There was also the belief that apostasy would not be forgiven -- those who denied their faith would suffer eternal damnation. This is based on Jesus' claim that whoever "disowns me before others, I will disown before my Father in heaven" (Matthew 10:33, paralleled in Mark 8:38 and Luke 9:26). But we have to counter this with Peter being forgiven after denying Jesus, and being elevated to leader of the disciples. Barclay reminds us that, as is often the case, "Jesus was gentler and more sympathetic and understanding than his church was."

Perhaps from what we have read from John so far, we could conclude that the sin that leads to death is the sin of the *antichrist* -- to believe that Jesus did not come in the flesh, and to deny the incarnation, would lead to eternal death.

While it is difficult to unpack precisely what John is saying here, it appears he is challenging his readers to pray for those who stumble and fall in the course of their daily lives that they may know forgiveness and restoration. But in the more serious matter of sin that "leads to death" they should not waster their prayers -- they are to no avail, for those people must pray for themselves. The sin that leads to death is the sin of not recognizing Jesus as Saviour, and being unwilling to seek forgiveness. Barclay captures the sin that leads to death, the *mortal sin*, as:

the state of the man who has listened to sin and refused to listen to God so often, that he loves his sin and regards it as the most profitable thing in the world."

We examine the fourth section of this 5th chapter, namely verses 18-21:

18 We know that anyone born of God does not continue to sin; the One who was born of God keeps them safe, and the evil one cannot harm them. 19 We know that we are children of God, and that the whole world is under the control of the evil one. 20 We know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true by being in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

This concluding paragraph (even if it is a 'postscript') serves to emphasize three important truths that John wants his readers to fully embrace -- Barclay calls them the "threefold Christian certainty":

- (i) The Christian is *emancipated from the power of sin*. We must be careful to see what this means. It does not mean that the Christian never sins; but it does mean that he is not the helpless slave of sin... The Christian is the man who may sin but never accepts the fact of defeat. "A saint," as someone has said, "is not a man who never fails; he is a man who gets up and goes on every time he fails."
- (ii) The Christian is *on the side of God* against the world. The source of our being is God, but the world lies in the power of the Evil One... the choice still confronts men whether they will align themselves with God or with the forces that are against God.
- (iii) The Christian is *conscious that he has entered into the reality* which is God. Life is full of illusions and impermanencies; by himself man can but guess and grope; but in Christ he enters into the knowledge of reality... Who am I? What is life? What is God? Whence did I come? Whither do I go? What is truth and where is duty? These are the questions to which men can only reply in guesses apart from

Jesus Christ. But in Christ we reach the reality, which is God. The time of guessing is gone and the time of knowing has come.

John once more emphasizes the need to 'remain' or 'abide' in Christ, for he is the only one who reveals the "true and eternal God" (verse 20). Again he takes a stab at the Gnostics, implying their condemnation for not "understanding" who Jesus, the *Son of God*, truly is... and for not accepting how he has come to give us this understanding.

And then we get the last sentence -- verse 21 -- a paragraph all by itself:

Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

At first glance it seems out of place. There has been no reference to 'idols' up to now -- why this sudden change of topic? And why is this all that is said about it? Barclay says that, "short as it is there is a world of meaning in this phrase." And most of its meaning is found in the context in which this Letter is written, in the city of Ephesus.

Barclay helps us to understand the word *idol* and the context -- he states:

- (i) In Greek the word *idol* has in it the sense of unreality. Plato used it for the illusions of this world as opposed to the unchangeable realities of eternity. When the prophets spoke of the idols of the heathen, they meant that they were counterfeit gods, as opposed to the one true God. This may well mean, as Westcott has it, "Keep yourselves from all objects of false devotion."
- (ii) An idol is anything in this life which men worship instead of God and allow to take the place of God. A man may make an idol of his money, of his career, of his safety, of his pleasure. Again to quote Westcott: "An idol is anything which occupies the place due to God."
- (iii) It is likely that John means something more than definite than either of these two things. It was in Ephesus that he was writing, and it was of conditions in Ephesus that he was thinking. It is likely that he means simply and directly. "Keep yourselves from the pollutions of heathen worship."

There were many religions (with their idols) and numerous temples in Ephesus, but chief among them was the Temple of Diana -- one of the wonders of the ancient world. In that context, in that city, John was on target with his admonition to keep away from idols. Barclay points out three things about the Temple of Diana which would help explain John's stern injunction, and justify his instruction to have nothing to do with heathen worship:

- (a) The Temple was the centre of immoral rites. The priests were called the *Megabyzi*. They were eunuchs. It was said by some that the goddess was so fastidious that she could not bear a real male near her; it was said by others that the goddess was so lascivious that it was unsafe for any real male to approach her. Heraclitus, the great philosopher, was a native of Ephesus. He was called the weeping philosopher, for he had never been known to smile. He said that the darkness to

the approach of the altar of the Temple was the darkness of vileness; that the morals of the Temple were worse than the morals of beasts; that the inhabitants of Ephesus were fit only to be drowned, and that the reason he could never smile was that he lived in the midst of such terrible uncleanness. For a Christian to have any contact with that was to touch infection.

- (b) The Temple had the right of asylum. Any criminal, if he could reach the Temple of Diana, was safe. The result was that the Temple was the haunt of criminals. Tacitus accused Ephesus of protecting the crimes of men and calling it the worship of the gods. To have anything to do with the Temple of Diana was to be associated with the very dregs of society.
- (c) The Temple of Diana was the centre of the sale of Ephesian letters. These were charms, worn as amulets, which were supposed to be effective in bringing about the wishes of those who wore them. Ephesus was “pre-eminently the city of astrology, sorcery, incantations, amulets, exorcisms, and every form of magical imposture.” To have anything to do with the Temple at Ephesus was to be brought into contact with commercialized superstition and the black arts.
- (d) It is hard for us to imagine how much Ephesus was dominated by the Temple of Diana. It would not be easy for a Christian to keep himself from idols in a city like that. But John demands that it must be done. The Christian must never be lost in the illusions of pagan religion; he must never erect in his heart an idol which will take the place of God; he must keep himself from the infections of all false faiths; and he can do so only when he walks with Christ.

This final exhortation, in one simple sentence, is really a summary of all that John has been saying in this Letter... Jesus came in the flesh to show us how to live a life that is pleasing to God, stick with him so you can be guided and strengthened, and stay away from anything contrary to God's will.

Leave darkness -- *walk in light*;

Abandon lies -- *deal in truth*;

Disarm hate -- *abide in love*.

INTRODUCTION to the 2nd & 3rd Letters

Date | Destination | Author

These two Letters are very different from the First Letter, even though they address some of the same concerns. They are so different that they must have been written by someone other than the writer of 1 John. They must have been written around the same time, however, at the end of the first century, around 98 to 100 A.D. Barclay concludes:

It is clear that *Second* and *Third John* are closely connected with each other; and that both are closely connected with *First John*. They are dealing with the same situation, the same dangers and the same people.

It is likely that they were destined for the same audience as the First Letter, namely the Christian congregations of cities in the Roman province of Asia Minor -- likely the seven churches that the Letters in Revelation 2 & 3 were sent to. All three letters seek to give pastoral guidance and encouragement to believers who are facing challenges.

Barclay observes:

The very shortness of these two letters is the best guarantee of their genuineness. They are so brief and so comparatively unimportant that no one would have gone to the trouble of inventing them and of attaching them to the name of John. A standard papyrus sheet measured ten by eight inches and the length of these letters is to be explained by the fact that they would each take up almost exactly one sheet.

It is quite obvious that the author of First John is not the author of Second and Third John. It is equally obvious that 2 and 3 John were written by the same author. Each of them is said to come from "The elder" and they both use similar vocabulary, sometimes the exact phrases, and both address similar topics. There could be three possible interpretations of the word *elder*:

1. an older person, *elder* in terms of age not office
2. an official of a local church, such as the *elders* that Paul ordained on his missionary journeys (Acts 14:21-23)
3. a special designation given to the *elders* who had been disciples of the apostles. Barclay explains: "The elders were the direct links between the second generation of Christians and the followers of Christ in the flesh." He concludes that it "is undoubtedly in that sense that the word is used here."

A closer examination of "The elder" reveals, as Barclay points out:

The word is *presuteros*, which originally meant *an elder*, not in the official but in the natural sense of the term. We would be better to translate it *The ancient*, or *The aged*,

for it is not from an ecclesiastical position but from his age and personal qualities that the writer of these letters draws his authority.

We know from other sources that there was an aged saint named John living in Ephesus around this time who held a very special position...he was known as *Elder John*. Barclay gives us some background to one of the sources:

In the days of the early church there was a churchman called Papias who lived from A.D. 70 to 146. He had a passion for collecting all the information he could lay his hands on about the early days of the church... He became bishop of Hierapolis but he had a close connection with Ephesus. He frequently uses *elder* in the sense of *one of the fathers of the Church*, and he mentions a particularly distinguished *elder* whose name was John... *Elder John*, John the aged, was a notable figure in Ephesus, although he is clearly distinguished from John the apostle.

All the evidence points to an Elder John, residing in Ephesus, who was a disciple of one of the apostles. This is the conclusion Barclay draws:

It must be this John who wrote these two little letters. By this time he was an old man, one of the last surviving links with Jesus and his disciples. He was a man who had the authority of a bishop in Ephesus and in the places around it; and when he saw that a church was threatened with trouble and heresy, he wrote with gracious and loving correction to his people. Here are the letters of an aged saint, one of the last of the first generation of Christians, a man whom all loved and respected.

It is also obvious that the same author wrote both Second and Third John. A few examples of what they have in common:

2 JOHN	3 JOHN
"whom I love in the truth" (verse 1)	"whom I love in the truth" (verse 1)
"children walking in the truth" (verse 4)	"children walking in the truth" (verse 4)
"we love one another" (verse 6)	"told the church about your love" (verse 6)
"I have much to write you, but I do not want to use paper and ink" (verse 12)	"I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink" (verse 13)
"I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face" (verse 12)	"I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face" (verse 14)

The main point that Elder John addresses in each letter is different, but his language, vocabulary and style are the same.

Before we move to look more closely at each of these two letters, there is something to consider... that is, the way the early church was organized, and the ministries that were recognized within her fellowship.

Barclay gives a concise explanation of categories of ministries that had evolved, and helps us to understand the dynamics that resulted in clashes of power and challenges to authority. He says much of what we see in 2 and 3 John was bound to arise as ministries developed and leadership emerged. "In its earliest days," he explains, "the church had three different kinds of ministries:

- (i) Unique, and above all others, stood the *apostles*, those who had companied with Jesus and had been witnesses of the resurrection. They were the undisputed leaders of the church. Their writ ran through the whole church; in any country and in any congregation their ministry was supreme.
- (ii) There were the *prophets*. They were not attached to any one congregation. They were wandering preachers, going where the Spirit moved them and giving to men the message which the Spirit of God gave them. They had given up home and occupation and the comfort and security of settled life to be the wandering messengers of God. They, too, had a very special place in the church.
- (iii) There were the *elders*. The elders were the officials of the settled community; their work was within their congregation and they did not move outside it. It is clear that they were the backbone of the organization of the early church; on them the routine work and the solidity of the individual congregations depended.

[These are the 'elders' referred to in point 2 earlier in this Introduction]

The apostles and the elders did not present much of a problem -- the apostles were universally accepted, and the elders were respected in their local churches. However, the wandering prophets did raise some issues and cause some confusion. It is these itinerant preachers who are referred to in these Letters. In 1 John the believers are warned that many of them are "false teachers." They are encouraged to listen to the message and to test the spirits -- if they do not teach the truth, reject them. In 2 John some are walking in obedience but some are not -- the believers are warned about the many "deceivers" who need to be rejected. And in 3 John the issue seems to be the other way around... those who should be accepted -- the faithful and obedient -- are being rejected!

2 JOHN - Walk in Obedience

We shall consider this short letter in 2 sections, beginning with verses 1-6:

1 The elder,

To the lady chosen by God and to her children, whom I love in the truth—and not I only, but also all who know the truth— 2 because of the truth, which lives in us and will be with us forever:

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

4 It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as the Father commanded us. 5 And now, dear lady, I am not writing you a new command but one we have had from the beginning. I ask that we love one another. 6 And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love.

These two brief letters begin quite differently from the First, which echoes the Gospel of John with a Prologue introducing Jesus. These Second and Third Letters have greetings and salutations, and are both sent from the Elder (we have already discussed who this might be) but are addressed to different people. 2 John is addressed to the “lady chosen by God and to her children” (New International Version). Other versions/translations of the Bible offer various renditions, such as:

- “the elect lady and her children” (King James Version | American Standard Version)
- “a very special woman and her children” (Contemporary English Version)
- “dear lady and her children” (Good News Translation)
- “My dear congregation” (The Message)
- “a certain Christian lady and her children” (J. B. Philipps New Testament)
- “that dear woman Cyria, one of God’s very own, and to her children” (Living Bible)
- “the elect (chosen) lady (Cyria) and her children” (Amplified Bible, Classic Edition)

The variations indicate that this phrase presents challenges in translating, and scholars have differing views on how it is to be rendered. The two main schools of thought suggest that it is written either to an individual person, or to a congregation which is referred to as a ‘lady’. Barclay explains the difficulties in the language concerning the first possibility:

In the Greek the phrase is *Eklektē Kuria*. *Kurios* (the masculine form of the adjective) is a common form of respectful address and *Eklektē* could just possibly -- though not probably -- be a proper name, in which case the letter would be written to *My Dear Eklektē Kuria*, besides being a title of respectful address, can be a proper name, in which case *eklektē* would be an adjective and the letter would be to *The Elect Kuria*.

Just possibly *both* words are proper names, in which case the letter would be to a lady called *Eklektē Kuria*.

But, Barclays suggests, if this letter is written to an individual, it is much more likely that *neither* word is a proper name and that the correct translation of the phrase is *The elect lady*. There have been many suggestions as to who the Elect Lady might be. Barclay mentions two of them:

- (a) It has been suggested that *The Elect Lady* is Mary, the mother of our Lord. She was to be a mother to John and he was to be a son to her (*John 19:26-17*), and a personal letter from John might well be a letter to her.
- (b) *Kurios* means *Master*; and *Kuria* as a proper name would mean *Mistress*. In Latin, *Domina* is the same name and in Aramaic, *Martha*; both meaning *Mistress* or *Lady*. It has, therefore, been suggested that the letter was written to Martha of Bethany.

However, Barclay and many other scholars believe that it is much more likely that the letter was written to a church. We see almost the exact same phrase in 1 Peter 5:13, where Peter sends greetings from one church to another:

She [your sister church here] in Babylon, [who is] elect (chosen) with [yourselves], sends you greetings, and [so does] my son (disciple) Mark. [Amplified Version]

And, considering the times they were living in, Barclay makes another point:

It may well be that the address is deliberately unidentifiable. The letter was written at a time when persecution was a real possibility. If it were to fall into the wrong hands, there might well be trouble. And it may be that the letter is addressed in such a way that to the insider its destination is quite clear, while to the outsider it would look like a personal letter from one friend to another.

We note that the greeting given here is unusual in that it differs from that in other New Testament letters. While all other greetings are in the form of a wish or a prayer, this greetings makes a statement: "God's grace, mercy and truth will be with us" (verse 3). Barclay comments: "John is so sure of the gifts of the grace of God in Jesus Christ that he does not pray that his friends should receive them; he assures them that they will receive them."

Here *Elder John* is echoing *Apostle John*, in that both speak passionately of **truth** and **love**, and the relationship between the two. While he rejoices to find some of the children "walking in the truth," the implication is that some were not. So he emphasizes what they already know... that the truth will lead to love, and love will lead to obedience. For Elder John to "walk in truth" (verse 4) is the same as to "walk in love" (verse 6). Or, as Barclay puts it, "it is significant that his first cure for all the troubles of the church is love."

Now we consider the second section of this letter, namely verses 7-13:

7 I say this because many deceivers, who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh, have gone out into the world. Any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist. 8 Watch out that you do not lose what we have worked for, but that you may be rewarded fully. 9 Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. 10 If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take them into your house or welcome them. 11 Anyone who welcomes them shares in their wicked work. 12 I have much to write to you, but I do not want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to visit you and talk with you face to face, so that our joy may be complete. 13 The children of your sister, who is chosen by God, send their greetings.

The theme that was so prominent in First John appears again here in Second John as the author decries the heretics who deny the reality of the incarnation. This heretical claim is so critical because it denies Jesus' ability to identify with us, which enables him to take our sins upon himself, which empowers him to save us from those sins. As Barclay put it:

If God could enter into life only as a disembodied phantom, the body stands for ever despised; then there can be no real communion between the divine and the human; then there can be no real salvation. He had to become what we are to make us what he is.

Martin Luther said of Jesus: "He ate, drank, slept, walked; was weary sorrowful, rejoicing; he wept and he laughed; he knew hunger and thirst and sweat; he talked, he toiled, he prayed... so that there was no difference between him and other men, save only this, that he was God, and had no sin."

Again we have the word 'antichrist' (verse 7), which means that Elder John was familiar with Apostle John's First Letter and apparently wanted to stress how important it is to attack these heretics by using the same strong term of rejection. "Here we see very clearly the danger which John saw in these false teachers," says Barclay. "They are to be given no hospitality; and the refusal of hospitality would be the most effective way of stopping their work."

The 'lady and her children' -- the pastor's 'flock' -- are cautioned against following the false teachers. They are warned that they are in danger of losing what they have worked for... they must "watch out" (verse 8)! Sounds like Jesus' warning to his disciples in the Garden of Gethsemane:

Watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation.
The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak. (Mark 14:38)

Verse 9 is interesting, and we need to explore the meaning of the Greek in order to grasp the full impact of what is being said. Again Barclay helps us:

The Greek is *proagōn*. The verb means *to go on ahead*. The false teachers claimed that they were the progressives, the advanced thinkers, the men of the open and adventurous mind... John insists that however far a man may advance, he must abide in the teaching of Jesus Christ or he loses touch with God. Here, then, is the great truth. John is not condemning advanced thinking; but he is saying that Jesus Christ must be the touchstone of all thinking and that whatever is out of touch with him can never be right. John would say, "Think -- but take your thinking to the touchstone of Jesus Christ and the New Testament picture of him." Christianity is not a nebulous, uncontrolled theosophy; it is anchored to the historical figure of Jesus.

Encouraged once more to be vigilant, and to listen only to those they can trust to guide them in the way of truth... those who "continue in the teaching of Christ" (verse 9), the 'children' are given another warning not to welcome the false teachers or to "take them in" (verse 10).

Bringing this brief letter to a close, Elder John explains that while there is a lot more to discuss, he prefers to talk in person rather than to write. He hopes to visit soon, and talk with them (as God spoke with Moses in Numbers 12:8) -- the literal translation is "mouth to mouth" not *face to face* -- so their joy can be complete (see *John 15:9-11*). Elder John was wise, observes Barclay,

and he knew that letters can often only bedevil a situation and that five minutes heart to heart talk can do what a whole file of letters is powerless to achieve. In many a church and in many a personal relationship, letters [and e-mails] have merely succeeded in exacerbating a situation; for the most carefully written letter can be misinterpreted, when a little speech together might have mended matters.

The closing greeting is more typical of New Testament letters than the opening greeting... remembering members of one congregation to another. Except that the same phrase used in the beginning is repeated -- the 'elect' -- translated in the NIV as "chosen by God" (verses 1 and 13), and instead of the elect *lady* here it's *your sister*. This reinforces the interpretation that the 'elect lady' is an assembly of believers not an individual person, and her 'sister' is another assembly.

3 JOHN - Walking in Truth

We shall consider this short letter in 2 sections, beginning with verses 1-8:

1 The elder,

To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

2 Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. 3 It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. 4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

5 Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. 6 They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. 7 It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. 8 We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

William Barclay, in his commentary ~~on this letter~~, points out that it is "exactly on the model which all letter-writers used in the time of the early church." To illustrate this he references a papyrus letter from Irenaeus, a ship's captain, to his brother Apolinarius, a portion of which is quoted here:

Irenaeus to Apolinarius his brother, my greetings. Continually I pray that you may be in health, even as I myself am in health. I wish you to know that I arrived. . . .
. . . been allowed to go. I greet your wife much, and Serenus, and all who love you, by name. Good bye.

Barclay concludes that these "early Christian letters were not something remote and ecclesiastical; they were the kind of letters which people wrote to each other every day." So Elder John wrote this letter (the kind people wrote every day) to his friend Gaius, a friend he loved "in truth." Gaius was a fairly common name; we read of a few believers with that name in the New Testament:

- Gaius the *Macedonian* who, along with Aristarchus, was with Paul at the riot in Ephesus (Acts 19:29);
- Gaius of *Derbe*, who was the delegate of his church to convey the collection for the poor to Jerusalem (Acts 20:4);
- Gaius of *Corinth* who had been Paul's host (Romans 16:23), and who was one of the few people that Paul personally baptized (1 Corinthians 1:14).

What do we know of this Gaius? We know that he was beloved by Elder John and is commended for being faithful to and walking in "the truth" (verses 3-4). And, according to tradition, he was made bishop of Pergamum by the apostle John.

Getting quickly to the first of the two reasons for his letter, John thanks Gaius for showing generous hospitality to the visiting preachers, even though they are “strangers” to him (verse 5). John commends them as part of a team who are working together “for the truth” (verse 8). His reference to these itinerant preachers “receiving no help from the pagans” (verse 7) may be understood in one of two ways:

- 1 - it may mean that they have not been offered hospitality or assistance by unbelievers during their travels;
- 2 - or, it may mean that they have refused any such offers, depending entirely on the faithful where they visit to take care of them for the “sake of the Name” (i.e. Jesus, who has been given the Name above all names -- Philippians 2:9).

John appeals to Gaius, and through him to others, to continue to show hospitality to “such people” in fulfillment of a scriptural requirement. Here are a few of the references to hospitality in the early church:

- I. **1 Peter 4:9** Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.
- II. **Hebrews 13:2** Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.
- III. **1 Timothy 3:2** A bishop (overseer) must be “hospitable”
- IV. **1 Timothy 5:9** A widow who receives assistance must be “known for her good deeds” such as “showing hospitality”
- V. **Romans 12:13** Share with the Lord’s people who are in need. Practice hospitality.

John encourages Gaius to treat the ‘strangers’ in such a manner that “honours God” (verse 6), reminiscent of Jesus’ claim that what we do for “the least of these” we do for him (Matthew 25:40). “In the early church the Christian home was the place of the open door and the loving welcome,” says Barclay; adding, “The Christian family circle should always be wide enough to have a place for the stranger.”

Now we consider the second section of this letter, namely verses 9-14:

- 9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. 10 So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.
- 11 Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.
- 12 Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.
- 13 I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. 14 I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

The second reason for this letter is now broached, and we are introduced to two more characters that feature prominently in this saga of church politics and power struggles -- meet Diotrephes and Demetrius.

Diotrephes is the leader in the local congregation; maybe an *elder* ordained by one of the missionaries, or maybe a self-appointed leader, or maybe he was elected to be in charge by the congregation. John had previously written to this congregation, apparently requesting from them similar hospitality and support to that which Gaius is giving, but Diotrephes will not welcome any visiting preachers, not even those who are coming with John's blessing. He doesn't want anyone else to welcome them either. The early church was by now going through some 'growing pains' -- the emergence of local leadership that would become more and more reluctant to bow to the authority of outsiders. Barclay puts it thus:

As the local churches became stronger and more conscious of their identity, they inevitably became less and less willing to submit to remote control or to the invasion of itinerant strangers.

Diotrephes, according to Barclay, "is so determined to see that the local congregation manages its own affairs that he will even eject those who are still prepared to accept the authority of John and to receive the wandering preachers." Elder John condemns Diotrephes' arrogance and pride ("he loves to be first") and his gossiping spirit ("spreading malicious nonsense") and promises to deal with him when he next visits.

The tone suggests that Gaius knew Diotrephes, but needs to be introduced to Demetrius. John reminds Gaius not to imitate Diotrephes (who he describes as 'evil'), but rather to imitate what is good, especially the goodness of God. Then he introduces Demetrius with the simple testimony that he is "well spoken of" -- by 'everyone' (wherever he has visited), by the 'truth itself' (Jesus, whose truth lives in him), and by John himself, whose testimony can be trusted. Another *three-fold* witness (as we saw also in 1 John 5) reinforces the testimony about Demetrius.

To summarize, before we reach the end of this letter -- which is very similar to the end of 2 John -- Barclay describes the scenario:

Here is the situation behind *Third John*. John represents the old apostolic remote control; Demetrius and his band of missionaries represent the wandering prophets and preachers; Diotrephes represents the settled ministry of the local elders, who wish to run their own congregation and regard the wandering preachers as dangerous intruders; Gaius represents the good, well-meaning man who is torn in two and cannot make up his mind.

What happened in this case, we do not know. But the end of the matter in the church was that the wandering preachers faded from the scene and the apostles in the nature of things passed from this earth, and the settled ministry became the ministry of the

church. . . these two little letters are of the most fascinating interest because they show the organization of the church in a transition stage, when the clash between the itinerant and the settled ministry was beginning to emerge and -- who knows? -- Diotrephes may not have been as bad as he is painted nor altogether wrong.

However, if what John says of Diotrephes in verses 9 and 10 is true -- that he is an arrogant snob, a gossip-monger, and excludes everyone he doesn't know from the fellowship -- even if we are sympathetic to his cause, we cannot condone his lack of love and grace. That is why, observes Barclay,

for all his powers of leadership and for all his dominance of character Diotrephes was not a real Christian, as John saw it. The true Christian leader must always remember that strength and gentleness go hand in hand. Diotrephes was like so many leaders in the church. He may well have been right, but he took the wrong way to achieve his end, for no amount of strength of mind can take the place of love of heart.

And so this little letter comes to an end... a lot more to talk about, but John would rather talk face to face ('mouth to mouth') than write with pen and ink. "Soon he will come and talk," says Barclay, "when his presence will do what no letter can ever do; and for the present he sends his greetings and his blessing." His blessing of *peace* was for each of them individually (his friends)... and equally for them collectively (his family).

CONCLUSION

By way of a conclusion, we simply reiterate the main points made in the Letters:

1 John

John the Apostle paints broad strokes of the main themes of the Christian life, as he sees them -- **Light, Truth, Love** -- all of which is presented in the context of *knowing* and *growing*... knowing more of Jesus, so that believers can, through grace, grow to be more like him. This knowing is possible because of the anointing of the Holy Spirit his guidance into truth.

Everything about the Christian life, for John, is grounded in the truth of the incarnation. Jesus is God, who became truly human -- the Messiah promised of old -- and in that unique combination he is our Saviour (the 'atoning sacrifice') and he is our Lord (we must 'keep his commands'). Those who reject the truth that Jesus came in the flesh get a special condemnation from John. In fact, he invents a word to describe those who deny the incarnation... he calls them the *anitchrists*.

Stressing the importance of *walking in the light* and *dealing in the truth* John also challenges his readers to *live in love* -- the love that God has first shown us, the love that we must share with others, the love that is the evidence of God living in us.

Though not structured like the typical letters of the time, this missive is clearly communicating a message from a concerned and compassionate pastor to his flock. Words of warning are balanced by words of challenge, and overall they are encouraged to be faithful.

2 John

Here Elder John seems to be writing to a particular congregation, and again the themes of *truth* and *love* feature prominently. Again, also, the "deceivers" (who deny Jesus came in the flesh) are soundly condemned. This letter is structured like the typical letters of the day, and is reminiscent of Paul's pastoral letters -- a particular problem is being addressed: those guilty of being misled are chastised, and all are encouraged to be discerning and strong.

3 John

Another typical letter, and again Elder John is wearing his pastor's hat, but this letter is addressed to an individual. The same issue is raised here -- the 'false teachers' are to be rejected. However, this situation is different in that some of the true and faithful preachers (like Demetrius) have also been rejected by Diotrephes. Seeking to find a diplomatic way out of this confusion John seeks Gaius' help, but does acknowledge that the problem may not be resolved until he can get there to sort it out.

Pastoral Letters addressing the challenges of living out the Christian faith in the rough and tumble of human relationships, threats to truth, and damage from church politics. and tumble of human relationships, threats to truth, and damage from church politics.

REFERENCES

American Bible Society

www.bibleresources.americanbible.org

BibleProject - Overview:
1-3 John (YouTube)

www.youtube.com/watch?v=l3QkE6nKylM&vl=en

Chuck Swindoll

www.insight.org

New International Version of the Bible

Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by [Biblica, Inc.](http://www.biblica.com)®

Roy Laman (Map)

www.roylaman.blog

William Barclay

The Daily Study Bible The Letters of John and Jude
© William Barclay 1976
The Saint Andrew Press