

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

Three letters are attributed to St. John. Like John's Gospel, they were most likely written by John's disciples or leaders of a Johannine community. Textual analysis has led scripture scholars to consider it likely that 1 John is from a different author than the Gospel, although some think it may have been a person who was involved in the Gospel's final editing. Scholars agree that one person wrote the other two letters, but are divided on whether that person also wrote the first.

Whereas the Gospel of John addresses the challenges raised by Judaism and others outside the faith community, the Letters are concerned with the fracturing of the community itself. Since the first two Letters concern dissidents who were not faithful to the Gospel's message, they were probably composed after the Gospel was substantially completed and known, if not already in its final form. The Third Letter of John doesn't address the dissident problem and may have been written before or after the others. The Gospel and the Letters were likely written and circulated c. 90-100 A.D..

First Letter of John – longer than the other two letters, it's more of a treatise than a letter, lacking the customary greeting and farewell wishes of New Testament letters. Instead, it has a brief prologue – similar to the Gospel – about the Word of Life, and ends with an appeal to pray, to avoid sin, and remember that they belong to God. The core of the letter deals first with the theme that God is Light and that believers must walk in that light. The second theme is the obligation of mutual love. The letter refutes the dissidents' teachings that we do not gain our salvation from Christ, and urges the fractured community to come together in the love that God models for them.

Outline (with selected verses)

1:1-4 – Prologue – The Word of Life

1:5-10 – God is Light; walk in the light and be cleansed of sin by the blood of Christ

God is light, and in him there is no darkness at all. (1:5b)

If we say, "We are without sin," we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

If we acknowledge our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive our sins. (1:8-9)

2:1-11 – If we are in Christ, we keep his commandments

Whoever claims to abide in him ought to live as he lived. (2:6)

*Whoever says he is in the light, yet hates his brother,
is still in the darkness.* (2:9)

2:12-17 – Community members know God and have conquered the evil one
If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. (2:15b)
Yet the world and its enticement are passing away.
But whoever does the will of God remains forever. (2:17)

2:18-29 – Many antichrists have appeared; they are liars and you have the truth

3:1-10 – You are God’s children now. Let no one deceive you.
See what love the Father has bestowed on us
that we may be called the children of God. Yet so we are. (3:1a)

3:11-24 – Love one another
Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth. (3:18)

4:1-6 – Test the spirits to see whether they belong to God or to the antichrist

4:7-21 – If God’s love is in us, we must love one another
In this is love: not that we have loved God,
but that he loved us and sent his Son as expiation for our sins.
Beloved, if God so loved us, we also must love one another (4:10-11)

God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him. (4:16b)

5:1-12 – The victory that conquers the world is our faith that Jesus is the Son of God

5:13-21 – Epilogue: Pray; God protects those who belong to him from the evil one

Second Letter of John – a short (only 13 verses) response to a community problem. It is addressed from “the Presbyter to the chosen Lady and to her children” – the specific community is not otherwise named. Dissidents have denied that Christ came in the flesh. They are antichrists and should not be extended hospitality or even greeted. Continue to walk in the truth, according to God’s commandments, and love one another.

Third Letter of John – another short letter (15 verses), addressed to Gaius, whom the Presbyter commends for walking in the truth. He asks him to welcome missionaries who rely on the hospitality of believers. A leader in Gaius’ community, Diotrephes, will not receive them and even expels those who do from the church. He also spreads “evil nonsense” about the Presbyter, who hopes to visit the community soon.