

# First John: Light & Life

## Introduction

Written By

©Dr. Marty Baker

March 6, 2022



**L**ooking back at the New Testament churches, we can falsely assume those were the good old days. Brave saints traveled throughout the known world preaching the gospel, and people from all nationalities and all walks of life came to know the Savior. To study the birth and growth of the Church in Acts is to literally see it explode onto the world scene after the death and glorious resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Yet when you read and study the letters of leaders like Paul, Peter, James, and Jude, which were written years after the founding of the Church, you quickly discover local churches had their share of demonically inspired external and internal attacks and divisive issues. One doesn't have to look far in the inspired writings of the men just mentioned to validate the premise:

- Judaizers, who were Jewish Christians who taught that in order to be saved people had to not just believe in the Messiah, Jesus, but they had to observe the Law of Moses, plagued NT churches. Writing from Corinth to the Romans, Paul systematically laid out for Jews and Gentiles how the wonderful gospel of Christ is what justifies a sinner, period (Rom. 1:16; 3:21-26; 4:1-24; 5:1-21).
- Written around 48 A.D., which was just prior to the Jerusalem Council in 49 A.D. (Acts 15), Paul, being a wise, skilled shepherd, took the churches to task in Galatia for actually entertaining the false gospel of the Judaizers. He minced no words putting these Christian charlatans in their place by pronouncing Anathema on them (Gal. 1). He also waxed eloquent in articulating the true gospel based on justification solely based on faith on Christ (Gal. 3:1-4:31).
- In Ephesians, Paul confronted saints at this most prestigious and powerful church in Asia Minor regarding all of the sordid sin they permitted in their body (Eph. 4:25-32). The negatives wedded to the present tense commands

here forbid action in *perpetual progress*.<sup>1</sup> Such behavior (unjustified anger, lying, stealing and so forth), according to Paul, merely served to grieve the Spirit of God, while also giving the Devil a foothold in their church (Eph. 6:10ff).

- Writing to the church in Colossae, which was located about ten miles south of Laodicea in Asia Minor (the eastern side of modern day Turkey), Paul addressed a new brand of Christian Judaism mixed with oriental Gnosticism. Judaizers sought to shackle saints to the perpetual observance of rituals in order prove and maintain their saved status (Col. 2:1-23). Gnostics, conversely, who believed they had the corner of esoteric spiritual truth, sought to teach the saints that matter was intrinsically evil and the spirit was good, therefore, it didn't matter what you did with the body in this life. Further, if matter was evil, then it logically meant the Messiah could not have really been in a human body. Logically, this tension between the evil body and the holy spirit caused Gnostics to create a vast gulf between God and man. Concerning this Hiebert remarks: "This gave rise to the 'doctrine of Aeons,' or intermediate beings, between God and the world. According to this view, since matter is evil, God can have nothing to do with this world directly. Accordingly He created another being somewhat inferior to Himself but worthy of having come from Him. This lower being, or emanation, produced another in a similar manner until a whole series of them, on a descending scale, came into existence. The lowest was close enough to the world to create the world of evil matter. Then this host of intermediary beings, or angels, became the objects of worship rather than God Himself, since He was too holy to be approached directly."<sup>2</sup> The Colossian church then divided up between the spiritual haves and have nots, thereby challenging their unity, cohesion, and growth. Thank the Lord for a pastor like Paul who hit the erroneous, dangerous, and insidious teaching head-on in chapters 1:15-2:23. Thank the Lord for a pastor like Paul who showed how heretical teaching can, and will, negatively impact a believer's practical walk and intimacy with Jesus (Col. 3:1-4:6).



<sup>1</sup> H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (Toronto: The MacMillan Company, 1955), 301.

<sup>2</sup> D. Edmond Hiebert, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, Vol. 2 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1977), 225-226.

I could go on with this analysis, but I think you get the point. The NT churches had their share of external and internal challenges, and leadership within said church had to rise to occasion to confront it and admonish the saints to stay the spiritual course so the churches enjoyed maximum cultural impact.

As a Christian and a pastor, I must say the internal issues are probably the toughest because of a variety of reasons. For one, you typically don't expect people you have loved, served, and worshipped with for years would, for personal and doctrinal issues, to turn against you, church members, and church leaders. For another, it is always shocking to see a saint embrace an erroneous, sometimes heretical belief, or to hold tenaciously to a preconceived, though untrue, idea of what someone said or did to them. Next thing you know, things spin out of control . . . which is the Devil's goal . . . as false teaching is presented as true teaching (from highly believable, sincere people), and an unfounded personal issue is hyped into a "real" issue. Chaos ensues. Friendships are shattered. Trust is destroyed. Joy is compromised. And all too often folks walk out the door of the once thriving church to never come back.

Dissension and disruption like we have just mentioned tore at the unity of the churches in Asia Minor John wrote about in First, Second, and Third John. As we shall see, nice-sounding, cleverly articulated new doctrines arose from within the churches from folks people knew and trusted. What was the result? According to 1 John 2:18-19, some once effective churches had unfortunately split, some members had left in a doctrinal huff, powerful and influential compromised teachers continued to teach outside the churches in order to lure more members to their doctrinal positions (1 John 2:26), and some leaders used heavy-handed politics inside the churches to silence the voices of sound doctrinal teachers (3 John).

And you thought the Bible was not relevant. Think again. John's three short epistles are needed today as much as they were in his day. The Devil continues to work to sideline, side-track, and shipwreck once thriving churches by all means possible from external to internal attacks, with the latter being the most formidable because you don't typically see it coming because it slips in quietly and begins to slowly change people's thinking so they move from sound to false doctrine before they even knew what happened. The result is always the same: Friendships are frayed (sometimes forever) and churches are left like bombed out buildings on a battlefield.

Enter John. He wrote to show us how to handle conflict, how to deal with doctrinal dissent, how to deal with people who claim to have new insight into old doctrines, how to identify a real maturing Christian, how to maintain an intimate relationship with Jesus, how to build a strong local church to the glory of the Lord, and how to make sure our church remains spiritually healthy so we can continue to cut deep into Satan's kingdom with the gospel of Christ and sound doctrine.

We begin our journey of this timely study with a customary analysis of the background of the books. Since we are digging first into First John, our foundational questions will be limited to this book.

## What Are The Introductory Questions We Need To Ask And Answer?

### Who Is The Author?

Although his name is not attached to the book, internal and external evidence points to John, the beloved disciple of Jesus (John 13:23; 19:26; 20:2; 21:7, 20), as the epistle's inspired author. His

name was probably not attached to the letter because it served as a circular letter designed to be passed around to the various churches in Asia Minor (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea, Colossae).

Internal evidence clearly shows how First John bears a strong lexical similarity with the Gospel of John. Here is a brief sampling of similar word usage:

WORD	FIRST JOHN	GOSPEL OF JOHN
Darkness	1:6; 2:9, 11 (3x)	1:5; 8:12; 12:35, 46
Truth	1:6, 8: 2:27; 4:6	1:14, 17; 3:21; 4:23, 24; 5:33; 8:32, 44, 45, 46; 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:7,13; 17:17; 18:37, 38
Commandment	2:3, 4, 7 (2x), 8; 3:22, 23, 24	10:18; 11:57; 12:49, 50; 13:34; 14:15, 21, 15:10, 12
Abide	2:6, 10, 17, 24 (3x), 27 (2x), 28; 3:6	1:7, 12, 50; 2:11, 22, 23; 3:12, 15, 16, 18, 36; 4:21, 39, 41, 42, 48, 50, 53; 5:24, 38, 44, 46, 47; 6:29, 30, 35, 36, 40, 47, 64, 69; 7:5, 31, 38, 39, 48; 8:24, 30, 31, 45, 46; 9:18, 35, 36, 38; 10:25, 26, 37, 38, 42, 45, 48; 12:11, 36, 37, 38, 39, 42, 44, 46, 47; 13:19; 14:1, 10, 11, 12, 29; 16:9, 27, 30, 31; 17:8, 20, 21; 19:35; 20:8, 25, 29 31

Word usage alone demonstrates a strong relationship between John's Gospel and His first epistle to the churches in Asia Minor. Further, the author says he was an eyewitness of Christ's life, which would easily pertain to John (1 John 1:1-5), and he writes in the first person because he did, in fact, write the inspiring letter (First John 2:1, 7, 8, 12, 13, 14, 21, 26; 5:13).

External, or historical evidence, also buttresses Johannine authorship of this epistle. Ancient church fathers like Irenaeus (2 A.D.), Dionysius of Alexandria (late 2 A.D.), Tertullian (early 2 A.D.) collectively states in their writings that John wrote First John. Here is a clip from Irenaeus:

The Gospel, therefore, knew no other son of man but Him who was of Mary, who also suffered; and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the passion; but Him who was born it knew as Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again, as John, the disciple of the Lord, verifies, saying: "But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and believing ye might have eternal life in His name,"—foreseeing these blasphemous systems which divide the Lord, as far as lies in their power, saying that He was formed of two different substances. For this reason, also he has thus testified to us in his

Epistle: "Little children, it is the last time; and as ye have heard that Antichrist doth come, now have many antichrists appeared; whereby we know that it is the last time. They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us: but [they departed], that it might be made manifest that they are not of us. Know ye, therefore, that every lie is from without, and is not of the truth. Who is a liar, but he that denieth that Jesus is the Christ? This is Antichrist". (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.16.5)<sup>3</sup>

There is much more we could say, but suffice it to draw this conclusion: Since John wrote it, it would stand to reason his letter possesses the power and authority of an apostle who had walked with and known Christ face to face. This, then, is someone to listen to in any age, especially ours.

## Where Was It Written?



"John, the disciple of the Lord . . . published the gospel while living at Ephesus."<sup>4</sup> Producing the first epistle here, then, seems logical. Irenaeus says he received his information from Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who was, in fact, a personal disciple of John. The fatherly language in the letter seems to suggest a spiritual leader who knew his children well, and his heavy usage of the plural pronoun "we" seems to suggest he is with these saints (1 John 1:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10; 2:1, 3, 5, 18, 28; 3:1, 2, 11, 14, 16, 19, 21, 22, 23, 24; 4:6, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 21; 5:2, 3, 9, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20). Fine NT scholars like D. Edmond Hiebert also take this position.

Asia Minor was a wealthy, intellectual, and highly cultural area of the world. Ephesus served as the main industrial, religious center because of its location on the Cayster River which

All agree John enjoyed a thriving ministry Ephesus, and that he might have even founded the church in this pivotal city. There is, however, much debate about the location of this writing. Some, like Zane Hodges, say it was written in Jerusalem and sent by a carrier to the churches in Asia Minor. That is possible, but I opt for the book being written in Ephesus.

Eusebius tells us John died and was buried here, and according to Irenaeus, who was Bishop of Lyons (France),

<sup>3</sup> Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John, The Pillar New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI; Leicester, England: W.B. Eerdmans Pub.; Apollos, 2000), 11–12.

<sup>4</sup> Zane Hodges, *The Epistles of John* (Denton: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 24.

led to the Aegean Sea. The beltway road system which connected all of the seven cities mentioned on Revelation chapters two through three served to make church planting easier. It also put the fledgling churches in close contact with all the materialism, hedonism, polytheism, and novel belief systems flourishing in the area. You couldn't have a better place to find church, but we should also not be surprised how readily the Christless, carnal culture seeped into the churches as they sought to fit in and be accepted. Again, there is much for us to pay attention to here for we live in our own beltway region of the world where false teachings flourish.

## When Was It Written?

It is hard to date the letter with specificity. The fact the letter doesn't mention the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans in 70 A.D. causes us to consider a date beyond this. Also, since John was probably around the same age of Jesus when He was crucified, say 37 (born winter of 5/4 B.C., died Sunday, May 24, 33),<sup>5</sup> we can easily see him alive as a true Elder around 80 A.D., when many say the book was written. He would have been around 84 years of age when the book was composed. Further, this seems to be a good date because the persecution John experienced prior to writing the book of Revelation didn't occur until the vile, ruthless reign of Emperor Domitian (81-96 A.D.). A date of 80 A.D., would give John time to write this epistle without being persecuted, while also leaving him enough time for the geo-political world to shift, allowing Domitian to rise to power with his anti-Christian leanings. This date would give us some forty-seven years after Christ's death and resurrection for the false teaching he encountered in the churches to grow and flourish. Note well, even in your old age you must be on your spiritual toes, especially if you are a leader in the local church. Your spiritual Adversary never sleeps, hence wise people always remain at their posts, making sure the spiritual father, young men, and children behind them are equipped to stand strong and true when, not if, the doctrinal winds blow.

## Who Was It Written To?

As stated, I believe John addressed this epistle, along with the other two as well, to the churches located in Asia Minor per Revelation chapters two through three. Various Greek phrases John employs in Revelation chapter two, for instance, also appear in his epistles. Robert Yarbrough gives us this helpful analysis in the *Baker Exegetical Commentary of the New Testament, 1-3 John*,

- The one who walks (**ὁ περιπατῶν**): Rev. 2:1; 1 John 1:6, 7; 2:6 (2x), 11; 2 John 4, 6 (2x); 3 John 3, 4.
- I know (**οἶδα**): Rev. 2:2; 1 John (15x); 3 John 12.
- Works (**ἔργα**): Rev. 2:5, 5; 1 John 3:8, 12, 18; 2 John 11; 3 John 10.
- Liars (**ψευδεῖς**): Rev. 2:2; 1 John 1:10; 2:4, 22; 4:20; 5:10.
- My name (**τὸ ὄνομά**): Rev. 2:3; 1 John 2:12; 3:23; 5:13; 3 John 7.
- Love (**ἀγάπη**): Rev. 2:4; 1 John (18x); 2 John 3, 6; 3 John 6.
- Do/Perform (**ποιέω**): Rev. 2:5; 1 John 1:6, 10; 2:17, 29; 3:4 (2x), 7, 8, 9, 10, 22; 5:2, 10; 3 John 5, 6, 10.
- I (Christ) come (**ἐρχομαι**): Rev. 2:5; 1 John 4:2; 5:6; 2 John 7.

---

<sup>5</sup> Harold Hohner, *Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975), 143.

- You/I hate (evil) (**μισεῖς/μισῶ**): Rev. 2:6; 1 John 2:9, 11; 3:13, 15; 4:20.
- The one who conquers (**ὁ νικῶν**): Rev. 2:7; 1 John 2:13, 14; 4:4; 5:4 (2x), 5.<sup>6</sup>

Moving through the other letters, it is not difficult to see how similar words and themes are intertwined. There is sparse lexical tie between the letter to Smyrna and the Epistles of John, however, it is not non-existent (“I know” and “conquer” appear in both). Persecution did come to this church for not giving into the the false Jews in the community who espoused false doctrine. So it appears the church was spared from internal attacks. However, such was not the case in the other churches.

*Ephesus*, which was known as a vibrant teaching church, one which countered false doctrine was castigated by Christ their High Priest for not really loving Him as they should (Rev. 2:1-7). The church in *Pergamum* (Rev. 2:12-17) had its share of false teachers who enticed the saints to engage in immoral activity, motifs which John’s epistles address. *Thyatira* (Rev. 2:18-29) is commend for her works by Christ; however, she is found guilty of permitting a false teacher of the ilk of Jezebel to drag the church into idolatry and sexually immoral behavior. The church in *Sardis* (Rev. 3:1-6) lacked spiritual works, which is what John highlights in his epistles. They were called to wake up from their spiritual stupor and repent. The church in *Philadelphia* (Rev. 3:7-13) is commended by Christ for holding onto sound doctrine in the face of intense and intolerant false teachers. They are challenged to persevere in the faith, which is reminiscent of what John says in his letters. The *Laodicean* church was the rich church (Rev. 3:14-22); however, they were really spiritually poor because they had become completely apathetic toward what constitutes truth and error. Christ castigated them as well and called for their quick repentance lest He judge them (Rev. 3:19-20).

Interesting. What John wrote about and sought to refute in these three epistles came into play in this churches. Some pushed back against the rising false teaching in their ranks, while others embraced and even welcomed it. Still others sought to crush it will a great doctrinal zeal (*Ephesus*), but their approach lacked real love for the Lord they sought to defend, while others didn’t seem to even think internal doctrinal compromise was a big deal (*Laodicia*).

We are, in a way, much like these ancient churches. We could say we are in a situation something like these churches must have been in around 80 A.D. when the epistles were written. They saw doctrinal deviation occurring in the culture, and they watched it start to invade the churches, but it took some fifteen years before the doctrinal deviations became a real divisive, church splitting threat. By 95 A.D., when John wrote Revelation, doctrinal upheaval hit some churches like a tsunami, leaving them divided and defeated. Now, none of these churches even exist. Sad, isn’t it?

What are we to think of John? Was he a bad, ineffective pastor? By no means. In his lifetime he fulfilled his pastoral calling, even though churches spilt and were embroiled in arguments all around him. He did not waffle when it came to sound doctrine, and he taught it with love and conviction. He called sin, sin. He called false teachers what they were. He spoke at length about how Christians should really treat each other while serving in the proverbial

---

<sup>6</sup> Yarbrough, Robert W, 1–3 John, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2008), 18.

trenches. Whether these churches listened to their pastor was on them. He did his duty well. May we all go and do likewise with the sound doctrine the Lord has given us.

## Why Was It Written?

Some believe John wrote First John to confirm the faith of saints. They base this off his statement at the close of his letter:

<sup>13</sup> These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, in order that you may know that you have eternal life. (1 John 5).

The prepositional phrase “these things” (*Ταῦτα ἔγραψα*) used here at the head of the sentence, is used one other time in 1 John 2, verse 26. In this usage it refers to the warning about false teachers John just discussed (1 John 2:18-25). It does not, therefore, refer to the whole book. Why, then, would the second usage in chapter 5 apply to the entire book like some kind of major purpose statement? Such is not the grammatical usage of the term. “These things” of chapter 5, verse 13 merely looks back the insightful discussion John just made in verses 6 through 12 about the true person and work of the Messiah, Jesus. One who understands, like these saints did, all of this rich doctrine knows the One who gives them eternal life (v. 11).

Further, when the demonstrative pronoun, *tauta* (*ταῦτα*) is used in the book with a present tense first or third person verb, “I write” or “we write” (1 John 1:4, *ταῦτα γράφομεν*, “we write”) ; 2:1, *ταῦτα γράφω*, “I write”), they point to the latter discussion, not to the entire book. In sum, to make this the purpose statement of the entire book, therefore, is unwarranted and leads one to look in every nook and cranny of the letter for information on how to determine who is saved and who isn’t.

All of this, in my view, serves to miss the real thrust of the letter. John, who realized his recipients were saved (1 John 2:12-14, 21), is very concerned that the false doctrines swirling around them would cause them lose their rich intimacy and fellowship with Jesus should they succumb to various facets of said teaching. This intimacy/fellowship motif is clearly stated in the author’s introduction:

<sup>1</sup> What was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we beheld and our hands handled, concerning the Word of Life<sup>– 2</sup> and the life was manifested, and we have seen and bear witness and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us<sup>– 3</sup> what we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, that you also may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father, and with His Son Jesus Christ. <sup>4</sup> And these things we write, so that our joy may be made complete. (1 John 1).

As he will readily show starting in verse 6, this wonderful fellowship with Jesus is compromised and curtailed when sin, in its various forms, enters our lives. Put positively, good doctrine can lead to a good relationship with Christ as you obey what you know. The flipside is true as well. Bad doctrine can, and will, destroy a great relationship you had with Christ. No, it doesn’t mean you are lost, but that your relationship is not optimal and enjoyable.

John's letter, therefore, is a polemic against internal "Christians" we will call revisionists. Tired of the doctrines John espoused, and being desirous of embracing new, progressive teachings which were more palatable to them, these heretics denied Christ as God's son, that Christ actually came in the flesh, and that His death was necessary for salvation to mention of few of their emphases we encounter in these epistles. We will dig more into the origins of these false systems of belief as we study the book in question, being mindful to dissect them with a taxonomy chart, and being mindful to also relate this tendency to drift doctrinally to our day and time.

In the meantime, might we all do our part in making sure we remain committed to biblical and logical truth above all things. Our world, like the world of John's day, seeks to infiltrate the local church and to get us to embrace their twisted views of truth so our faith is compromised and curtailed . . . and so our church might be thrown into a state of outright chaos. While we are on watch in our decadent, devious day, we must be like John of old. Fearless, courageous, and compassionate.