

John's Letters Outline

Introduction: The Letters of John all share linguistic and theological similarities with the Gospel of John. Traditionally, John is believed to have authored the Gospel and the letters. Today most folks believe if the same person didn't author the Gospel and the letters, than a "Johannine" community was responsible due to how similar they are. Because of this the letters are dated in a similar time frame as the Gospel being around the year 100 CE.

The three letters probably formed a set, given that the second two letters are so inconsequential it is unlikely they would have survived unless bound to a more substantive letter like First John. If this is correct then Third Letter was probably the cover letter for Second and First John commending the letter carrier, Demetrius, to Gaius, the leader in the community. The Second Letter was then a letter introducing First John, and First John itself then isn't really a letter as much as a kind of sermon like Hebrews.

The issue in the letter of First John, and the issue that colors the other letters as well, is a rift in the community. While the other letters we've looked at so far speak of outside teachers and pressure from outside groups, the Letters of John address a split within the church itself. And while this might not represent a big problem to some communities, to a community like John's community, a community that believed in love above all else, a split called into question the very foundation of the what the church believed. In other words a community that billed themselves as the most loving community felt incredibly threatened and challenged when they weren't, apparently, loving enough to prevent a large group from taking off.

And so, the writer here focuses heavily upon the community that's left, assuring them that by holding fast to their beliefs they are themselves the embodiment of love, and that by leaving the beliefs of the community, the brothers and sisters who left weren't real brothers and sisters at all. The argument is similar to when your mom would try and make you feel better when somebody was making fun of you telling you that anybody who would say mean things to you wasn't your real friend anyway.

The remarkable thing about the letters is that as bitter as the writer is about the false brothers and sisters who left to start their own congregation (calling someone an 'antichrist' is pretty negative, you might agree), the letters really don't focus on 'them' and how bad 'they' are. The letter spends almost all of it's time focusing on the community itself and calling it to regroup and focus on what is really most important after all is said and done: on love. These letters are for us when we've been hurt by somebody, and we kind of want to nurse our wounds, but we know we need to get up and get back to work and focus on the positive.

First John

Chapter 1: The word of life; God as light and if we say we have to sin the truth not in us

Chapter 2: Exhortation to sanctification; new commandment about not hating other believers;

Warning against 'the world'; many antichrists around after split who say

Jesus is not the Christ

Chapter 3: We are called children of God; loving one another and trusting in Christ

Chapter 4: Testing the spirits; God is love and we love because of God's initiative

Chapter 5: Love of God entails following commandments freely; importance of the Spirit;

Distinction between mortal sins and non-mortal

Second John

Chapter 1: John's letter to a woman asking her not to welcome false teachers into her house

Third John

Chapter 1: Letter to Gaius asking him to support missionaries and criticizing Diotrephes

Stories to know: If we say we have no sin (1.1); Testing the spirits (1.4); God is love (1.4)