

# No Room For Error

## *Introduction and Overview*

### (I, II, III John)

#### Introduction:

#### 1. Basic Overview of the three letters/epistles:

- **I John** – A more practical letter, probably addressed to a broad Christian audience located in a Roman controlled area of Asia known to us today as Western Turkey.
  - 1) Perhaps since John had a significant influence in the *Church at Ephesus* – it may have been intended for them.
  - 2) Another possible suggestion is that since John had an overall ministry to the *Seven Churches of Asia* (mentioned in Revelation 2-3) – it may have been intended for them as a circular document.
  - 3) It seems that our best evidence is that the letter itself was addressed to a Christian audience (with some level of spiritual maturity) in which John warns against the **dangers of false teaching**, and the importance that believers should **live out their life of faith through obedience to God** and in **showing love to one another**. We sometimes refer to this as \_\_\_\_\_; being *separated to God*, and *separated from the world*. **It is the act of pursuing holiness and consecrating oneself to God through the act of obedience and dedication to His precepts – The Word of God.** (Romans 12:1-2, II Corinthians 5:17, 20, Ephesians 2:5, 4:22-32, 5:1-20, 6:10-24)
  - 4) Personally I believe the letter was a “circular” letter which was intended for a broad audience (Perhaps all the churches of Asia where John ministered) and not just one specific church or individual...but that is only my opinion.

- **II John** – is a short and also a very practical letter
  - 1) The letter is inspirational in its format and its content appears to also be intended for a particular community of believers.
  - 2) In this letter (just as in I John) the writer warns against error and heresy that is being promoted by “little antichrists” (those who tried to imitate The Christ, but in reality taught heresy or error about Him).
  - 3) Another similarity to I John is that the writer also encourages obedience to God’s commands, especially in the area of loving one another.
  - 4) Church tradition emphasizes the Apostle John’s claim that love is an important mark of a Christ follower as various early church writers quote John as saying; “Little children love one another” and when questioned by his disciple as to why he would so often say those words his reply was; It is the Lord’s command, and if this alone be done, it is enough!”
- **III John** – is also a short document and appears to be more of a personal letter written to one individual
  - 1) The intended recipient of the letter was a man named **Gaius**
  - 2) Most conclude that **Gaius** lived in the then Roman controlled region of what we now call Turkey (probably more like the western portion of Turkey)
  - 3) The Apostle John ministered in this same region of western Turkey for that is the location of the seven churches of Asia that he addresses in Revelation 2-3 (*Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Laodicea, Philadelphia, and Pergamum*)
  - 4) The writer of III John is encouraging Gaius to show hospitality to a travelling preacher named **Demetrius**. This created some conflict as a man named **Diotrephes** (a seemingly overpowering church leader or bishop) held a differing opinion regarding travelling preachers, which John felt compelled to straighten out by a personal visit (Vs 10). It seems the matter could be easily resolved and John chose not to elaborate further by providing any more detail as to the outcome.

## 2. Author and Date

- The traditional and the most widely held view is that the \_\_\_\_\_ wrote all 3 letters/epistles:
  - 1) The writer does not use his name in either of the three letters but from the very first verse we can see that the author is an eyewitness to the incarnate life of the Lord Jesus, as well as someone who speaks with the authority of an Apostle; “What was **from the beginning**, what we have heard, what we have **seen with our own eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our own hands, concerning the word of Life** – and the life was manifested, and we have seen and testify and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was manifested to us. What we have seen and heard we proclaim to you also, so that you too may have fellowship with us and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with **His Son Jesus Christ**. These things we write that your joy may be full” (I John 1:1-4)
  - 2) We have numerous confirmations from the writings of the early church leaders (*Irenaeus*, *Clement of Alexandria*, and *Tertullian*) that the Apostle John was the author.
  - 3) Our best evidence is the internal evidence of the letters themselves; the author was knowledgeable of the Old Testament and Jewish customs, ideas and expectations. The author was an eyewitness to the life of Christ as he provides specific details to that fact. Finally, by a mere process of elimination the authorship clearly points to John the Apostle.
  - 4) There is good solid, well rounded evidence (style, modes of thought, etc.) that the writer of the Gospel of John is the same person who wrote all three epistles (I, II, III John).
  - 5) There has been very little (if any) credible evidence to support another author besides the John the Apostle.

- A little biographical sketch on the Apostle John:
  - 1) He was the son of Zebedee and Salome who may have been in the upper class (they had servants Mark 1:20, financial resources, and may have known the high priest John 18:15)
  - 2) The younger brother of John was James (the one martyred by Herod Agrippa I in 44 A.D.– not the author of the book of James)
  - 3) John apparently did not attend any rabbinical schools, but his family upbringing would have imparted the usual religious training found in a typical Jewish home.
  - 4) John was from the region of \_\_\_\_\_, he was a fisherman, an industrious man, a man of hard work. He might have even been a little rough around the edges (known as one of the “sons of thunder”).
  - 5) After the Day of Pentecost, John will at some point leave Jerusalem (though probably not immediately) and tradition has him ministering in Asia Minor (primarily Ephesus). It is believed that he (at some point) became the Pastor of the church in Ephesus, probably sometime prior to the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Titus in 70 A.D.
  - 6) During his time in Asia Minor, he developed a “regional ministry”, influencing the churches of Asia (Revelation 2-3).
  - 7) He was briefly exiled (by Emperor Domitian) to the Isle of Patmos where he received The Revelation of Jesus Christ. He was later released and returned to Ephesus where it is believed he founded other churches and mentored and disciple the great church leader named Polycarp.
  - 8) Church tradition teaches that John, though known as the “apostle of love”, was intolerant of heresy and intense in his condemnation of false teaching.
  - 9) It is believed John died around 100 A.D., he would have been the oldest surviving Apostle and the last/final author of the New Testament.

- There are two basic schools of thought as to the **date** John wrote his letters
  - 1) One school of thought holds to a date that precedes the Jewish wars/revolts with Rome and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus. Those who hold this view point do so because John doesn't reference these wars/revolts nor does he reference the destruction of Jerusalem.
  - 2) The other school of thought is that John wrote the three Epistles/letters after he wrote his Gospel account which is traditionally held to have been written toward the latter part of his life, 85-90 A.D.
  - 3) My personal feeling on this one is that all three letters were written after the Gospel of John and thus I hold to a date sometime around 90 A.D.

### **Background Information**

1. Since we find basic agreement that John is our author, that the recipients of his letters were located in the region of Asia Minor, and the time of the writing was between, 60-95 A.D., then we will base our historical and background on those parameters.
2. In all three letters, John addresses false teaching, heresy and or misrepresentation of the truth. This was expected and did not catch John by surprise – but it needed to be addressed none the less. Other New Testament writers speak of such warnings:
  - This heresy and false teaching was spoken of by the Apostle Paul in that he warned the Ephesian elders; “Be on guard for yourselves and all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples after them. (Acts 20:28-30)
  - Paul also reminds Timothy (who also served in Ephesus); “For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but wanting to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths” (II Timothy 4:3-4)

- Even Jude warns; “For certain persons have crept in unnoticed, those who were long beforehand marked out for this condemnation, ungodly persons who turn the grace of God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.” (Jude 4)
  - Peter wrote these words of warning; “But false prophets also arose among the people, just as there will also be false teachers among you, who will secretly introduce destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing swift destruction upon themselves” (II Peter 2:1)
3. The entire region of Asia Minor (primarily Ephesus) was a cosmopolitan compilation of mystical cults, polytheistic (many gods) and pantheistic (god in nature/everything) beliefs, as well as pagan rituals and practices.
- These false belief systems found their way into the church through those who pretended to be followers of Christ but were not.
- 1) John identifies these “pretend followers” as antichrists (I John 2:18-26) and they were the false teachers of his day whose **identifiable error** was in **their denial that Jesus is the Christ**.
  - 2) These false belief systems do not have a provision for the atonement for sin which puts them at odds with Christianity since Scripture teaches that Jesus is our propitiation or substitute. His death on the cross ransomed/ redeemed us from the penalty of eternal separation from God if we believe by faith.
  - 3) The dilemma for the false teacher of John’s day was that the evidence of Christ’s death, burial and resurrection was irrefutable – there were just too many witnesses. Thus their best attack against Christianity was to make Christ something other than or less than what he claimed to be.
  - 4) These false teachings often fell into one of two groups; those who were lawless (licentious or hedonistic), believing that anything goes (by separating the flesh and the spirit), and others who held that knowledge was superior to virtue/faith and that knowledge could really only be understood by a select few leading to a sense of enlightenment. The charges that Jesus brought against the seven churches of Asia revealed they were guilty of both.

- We are not precisely sure as to which heresies or heretics John was specifically referring to in his Epistles, but I am not sure that really matters since many of them in one way or another overlap themselves. Here are a few possibilities:
  - 1) The **heresy of Cerinthus** (A first century Joseph Smith); who taught that Jesus was only a man and that the divine Christ descended on Jesus at His baptism and then left/departed from him at the crucifixion. We don't know a lot about Cerinthus, but church tradition claims that he lived in Roman Asia and was strongly opposed by the Apostle John.
  - 2) **Gnosticism** - It comes from the Greek word "*gnosis*" and means *knowledge*; and in many circles of "Orthodoxy" it has evolved into a sort of "secret knowledge" as if the followers of this teaching in some way had the ability to understand the "mysteries" of life through the pursuit of knowledge, wisdom and philosophy. *In some ways it could be understood as simple as the understanding gained through personal experience or "transcendental expression". In its broadest definition it is used to understand that salvation, nirvana, or the afterlife is obtained through the pursuit of individual wisdom.* Although "formal Gnosticism" did not take hold as a fully fledged belief system until the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> centuries; their error and deception were present in John's day as they adopted the belief in **dualism** (*the material world is evil and has no intrinsic value, while in the spirit world one can find complete peace and harmony for that is where all good things rest*). Therefore the "created world" of all that is physical is the product of a **lesser god** (*called the Demiurge*) and of little or no value to the Gnostic.
  - 3) **Dualism** - *is a teaching in which mind and matter are two separate and distinct entities.* This heresy (which is the basic tenet of Gnosticism) seeks to promote a two god system and in some cases a multi, plural, or poly god system of belief. Basically one god created what is good and this god works in the realm of order and promotes such. Another god created what is bad and this god works in the realm of chaos and promotes such. This system of belief is right from the pit of hell and is the foundation of the system of belief known as **Zoroastrianism** which can be traced back to the times surrounding the Tower of Babel. It is the religion of the Anti-Christ and can be evidenced in such belief systems as (including but not limited to); Scientology, Mormonism, Kabalism, and the more extreme Shiite forms of Islam!

- 4) **Ebionism** – This was a philosophy that blended Judaism and Christianity and taught that the Law of Moses was equal to the doctrine/teachings of Christ. They held to a view in which Jesus Christ limited in His divine nature. They believed and taught that the accomplishments made by Jesus were worthy to be noted and held Him in high regard, but considered His commands and teachings pretty much equal with Moses. They believed and practiced baptism (primarily for the purposes of repentance), observed the Lord’s Supper, and worshipped on the seventh day of the week (Saturday). The Apostle Paul often battled this heresy on his missionary travels.
- 5) **Stoicism** has its roots in the Greco-Roman Empire and was actually a “school of philosophy” that was popular among the educated elite. *Its basic tenet is that self control, fortitude and detachment from distracting emotions, will allow a person to become more of a clear thinker, level headed and unbiased. In perfecting the mind and spirit (accomplished through the pursuit of philosophy) it allows the person to become tolerant or indifferent to pain and pleasure.* This system of belief is driven by virtue, reason and natural law but the peace that it pursues is peace with oneself and not necessarily peace with God.
- 6) **Asceticism** – *is the active pursuit of virtue with the intending purpose of achieving greater spirituality. This is accomplished through denying the flesh all worldly pleasures.* Where asceticism usually erred is when it was taken to its extreme. Somehow the denial of worldly pleasures was interpreted to mean that we should beat our bodies into submission by torture, mutilation, or abstaining from sex, eating, or sleep. These of course are the extremes but considered a necessity to achieve human enlightenment. Asceticism is practiced in most if not all the major religions in some form or fashion (i.e. Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, etc.) and if you study it out you will see at its foundation is where the error exists. When we seek to achieve “enlightenment” at the human level (in this case through the denial of the flesh) it falls short because were not intended to separate what God has put together (mind, body and soul). To deny the flesh to obtain a sort of oneness with God “misses the mark” because we cannot in and of ourselves atone for the error that exists within our entire being - only Jesus can!



7) **Docetism** – *was the belief that Jesus’ physical body was an illusion and so was His crucifixion. Therefore Jesus only “seemed” (from the Greek word dokeo – seem) to have a physical body and only seemed to have died.* This is a “Gnostic” belief that permeated the first century and was considered heretical by the Church but it began a process where some began to question the validity of Christ’s Deity and or humanness. This heresy eventually died out but created a very divisive controversial false teaching that the church faced in the 4<sup>th</sup> century call Arianism.

8) **Arianism** – A much later view held by followers of Arius (a Christian priest from Alexandria, Egypt) which began in the 4<sup>th</sup> century (early 300’s), but resulting from these previous heresies in which *the basic teaching was that; God the Father and God the Son were not co-eternal. They believed and taught that Jesus (even in His pre-incarnate status) was divine but none the less a created being. In other words at some point in time Jesus did not exist and therefore would have been inferior to the Father.* This position (Arianism) was disputed and deemed heretical by the early Church but this is where much of the erosion of “Orthodoxy” (the adherence to traditional and established beliefs) began. The large percentage of early “church leaders” continued to support “Trinitarian” doctrine and only a handful of “rogue priests” attempted to challenge this belief by supporting Arianism. In the end the early push towards Arianism failed and Trinitarianism prevailed but not without some significant schisms that would follow the Council of Nicea. Although this heresy developed in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, its roots were right out of Gnosticism, Dualism, Docetism and other forms of false teaching. This heresy did force the church to establish creeds and covenants to accurately identify ones position. Unfortunately due to the continued divisions this heresy created and the meddling of the Roman Emperor Constantine; it also caused a merging of the church with the state resulting in all sorts of compromise and corruption....which would be a whole other lesson in itself.

4. The thing to keep in mind is that in all of these heresies that John faced, those faced by the early church, and those we continue to face today (i.e. Scientology, Mormonism, and even Islam) can all be summed up as religion that teach we must do something in order to be acceptable to God. As such they deny Jesus Christ as the “only way to the Father” (John 3:16, John 14:6, Romans 10:9-10, Acts 4:12) and do not embrace him as the Savior of mankind and deny His atoning sacrifice for our sin.

## A Few Practical Nuggets and Concluding Remarks

1. John's primary focus is having fellowships with God (I John 1:3), something that marks a genuine follower of Christ.
2. John also conveys to us that another true mark of a genuine follower of Christ is **pursuing/being righteous (living rightly)**. The character traits and qualities of that "right life" can be found throughout the teachings of Jesus Christ (i.e. His "*Sermon on the Mount*", *parables* etc.), and the writings of the Apostles (i.e. *fruit of the Spirit* etc.). This "**right living**" comes as a result of a transformed life (one that has been "**born again**" – John 3:1-21), in which the Holy Spirit indwells the believer who has confessed their sin and believed in faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God. (I John 1:7, see also Romans 10:9-10, John 3:16, Ephesians 1:7, 13-14)
  - "These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name" (John 20:31)
  - John will testify (as a recurring theme) throughout his First Epistle that there are three very good evidences of someone who has true knowledge of God and true fellowship with God:
    - 1) Sound \_\_\_\_\_ in Jesus as God incarnate (John 1:1-4)
    - 2) Brotherly \_\_\_\_\_
    - 3) \_\_\_\_\_
  - This transformed life will result in:
    - 1) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 2) \_\_\_\_\_
    - 3) \_\_\_\_\_
3. Questions/Comments: