A Study of the 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John

Primary Reference:

Concordia Commentary: 1 – 3 John **by Bruce G Schuchard, M.Div, STM, PhD**
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Introduction

In Leonardo da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper, how is the Apostle John depicted and what personality characteristics does that imply?

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As we all agree, the Bible is the inspired Word of God meaning "God the Holy Spirit gave to His chosen writers the thoughts that they expressed and the words they wrote (verbal inspiration)" [from the explanation of *Luther's Small Catechism*]. However, the Holy Spirit did not dictate the Bible with each writer acting only as a scribe. The writers of the Bible retained their own personalities and writing style and they wrote in the linguistics and historical background consistent with the cultures in which they lived.

Therefore, understanding the personality, character, and historical events surrounding the Apostle John is important in interpreting the Books of the New Testament that he wrote. So, let's take a look at John, the person. As we all remember, John was part of Jesus' inner circle among the 12 Apostles along with Peter and John's brother James. What additional information do the following verses tell us about John's background, station in life, character, and personality?

Mark 1:19 – 20 and **Luke 5:8 – 10** _____

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Mark 3:16 – 17, **Luke 9:51 – 56,** and **Mark 9:38 – 40**

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Matthew 20:20 – 24 _____

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At the same time, John apparently had a different side to him. John is described as the "disciple whom Jesus loved". What does **John 19: 26 – 27** tell us about John and why would Jesus choose John over his three other half-brothers?

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Following the Resurrection and Pentecost, New Testament (NT) references about John are sparse, but we can glean a few interesting relationship dynamics from the **Gospel of John**, **The Acts of the Apostles,** and **Galatians**. What do we learn about John (and Peter as well) from the following verses including how their relationship changed after Pentecost?

John 21:20 – 23 _____

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Acts 4:1 – 4 and **Acts 8:14 – 17**

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How might **Acts 12:1 – 3** shed some light on the "Sons of Thunder" nature of James and John and possibly the dynamic between the two?

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The last time that **The Acts of the Apostles** mentions activities or the presence of the Apostle John is the mission with Peter to Samaria in **Acts 8** that we previously read around 34 – 36 A.D. In **Galatians 2** you will recall that Paul mentions going to Jerusalem and meeting with Peter, James (the half-brother of Jesus and head of the Jerusalem church at that time), and John. This would have been around 45 – 46 A.D. Although we assume John was present at the First Jerusalem Council in A.D. 49, he is not mentioned.

Based on the writings of many early "Church Fathers", theologians, and historians in the 2nd, 3rd, and 4th centuries (especially the writings of Irenaeus around 180 A.D.) John likely left Jerusalem some time before the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 A.D. and resided in Asia Minor (present day Turkey), most likely in Ephesus. He was likely exiled by the Roman Emperor Domitian to the Island of Patmos around 95 A.D. to labor in the mines. When Domitian was killed in 96 A.D. it appears John was released and returned to Ephesus where he wrote the works that are included in the New Testament. He is reported to have been very active to very end of his life and established bishops throughout Asia minor to guide the early church. He continually battled heretical teachings. He died of natural causes in Ephesus around 98 – 105 A.D. probably at the age of 90 – 95. By tradition, he was the only Apostle not to have been martyred.

Let's read **Revelation 1:9 – 11**. How do these verses support that John moved to Ephesus (or a town in that region) prior to his exile on Patmos? Hint: Find a Bible map of Asia Minor at that time.

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Most scholars believe that **Revelation** was written by John during his exile on Patmos or just after he was released. (95 – 96 A.D). Dr. Schuchard in his *Concordia Commentary* on **1st, 2nd,** and **3rd John**, makes an elegant case that **Revelation** was written first, then **1 – 3 John,** with the **Gospel of John** being written last. This varies from traditional chronological authorship that we may have been told growing up as well as Revelation being ordered last in our Bibles. Regardless, most scholars believe that all 5 books written by John were written in the 95 – 98 A.D. time period. This would be approximately 50 years (45 A.D. – 95 A.D.) after the last mention of the Apostle John in the rest of the New Testament. Considering John's prominence in the Church as being one of Jesus' inner circle, it would seem unlikely that any significant writings of John between 45 A.D and 90 A.D. would not have been preserved by the Church and included in our Canon of Scripture. Therefore, it is assumed that John did not write anything of substance until after his exile from Patmos. What might this indicate about John's style of leadership and ministry in the early church as well as how John intended for **1 John** and **2 John** to be communicated to their recipients? Hint: See **2 John 12** and **3 John 13 – 14**.

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Besides the 50-year gap in historical references to John in the NT, it is more important to realize that there is a 30-year gap between the last Epistles of Paul and Peter (around 67 A.D.) and the writings of John.

How would such a gap affect the dynamics of the churches in Asia that were originally established by Paul (or under Paul's direction) and thus shed light on how we should interpret the Epistles of John?

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Acts 20:17 – 18, 28 – 31 is the account of Paul stopping off at Ephesus as he makes his way back to Jerusalem during his last missionary journey. How does this 30-year gap between Paul's Epistles and John's Epistles help us better understand the significance of these verses?

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Stop and consider what is means to the Church (and to you personally) that the Holy Spirit inspired John, as he neared death, to write **Revelation, 1 – 3 John,** and **the Gospel of John** 30 years or more after the death of Peter and Paul. How is that an example of God's grace collectively to the Church and to you personally?

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How is the 50-year gap in John's history totally counter to our pop culture today and what does this say about God's Word?

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There have been many challenges through the centuries to the authorship of the books of the Bible attributed to John the Apostle, especially the **Epistles of John** that we are about to study. Why do we care whether John the Apostle was the author?

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Historically, the authorship of the **Gospel of John** and **1 John** has been more strongly attributed to the Apostle John with **2 John** and **3 John** being more controversial. However, even a short introductory comparison of these four Books of the Bible presents substantial internal evidence that they were all authored by the same person. Let's look at some of the more obvious passages and later delve into more detailed/subtle comparisons as we go through the books verse by verse.

What similarities and differences in vocabulary and theme do you see when comparing the following?

John 1:1 – 4 and **1 John 1:1 – 5**

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John 13:34 – 35, 1 John 2:7, and 2 John 5

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John 14:23, 1 John 5:3, and **2 John 6**

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John 16:24, 1 John 1:4, and **2 John 12**

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2 John 1 – 4 and **3 John 1 – 3**

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Why do you think John refers to himself as "The Elder" in these verses instead of clearly identifying himself as an Apostle like Paul does in his Epistles?

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Dr. Schuchard provides a lengthy examination of the authorship of **1st, 2nd, and 3rd John** supporting that they were written by the Apostle John. However, he provides a nice summary by stating:

> *The most satisfying answer to the question of the authorship of John's Letters is that that the testimony of the earliest church, even as modest as this proves to be in the case of **2 John** and **3 John**, is to be trusted. By the grace of God, the former fisherman became a disciple and apostle of Jesus Christ. Even more, he became the author of the Letters that bear his name. The church's longstanding opinion remains an eminently reasonable supposition, namely, that John the son of Zebedee, a pillar of the earliest church...,was the author of the Letters. The burden of proof lies with those who would argue otherwise. The uniform testimony of the earliest church, together with the hard evidence of the manuscripts in our possession which themselves attribute their composition to the same person, make the traditional view of the Letters' authorship far and away the most likely view.*

To properly interpret **1st, 2nd, and 3rd John** we must understand what heretical teaching the Apostle John was refuting that was causing division within the Churches of Asia Minor. At that time and place in history, society was dominated by the Greco-Roman culture. From a philosophical standpoint, that culture was heavily influenced by the Greek philosophers, especially Plato (ca. 427 – 347 B.C.). Dr. Schuchard quotes Karen H. Jobes, Professor Emerita of New Testament Greek and Exegesis at Wheaton College to explain that background. Here in part is that quote:

> *By the time Jesus came into the world, various Greek philosophers had expounded Plato's ideas into a variety of theories that were applied to religious thought. In such schools of thought, the material world was not just inferior to the spiritual world…the material world was ethically and morally evil. When those with this philosophical bent applied this thought to the Christian gospel, the Christ-spirit who dwelt "above" in the spiritual world of perfect forms could not <u>really</u> have become a material human being, for such perfection could not comingle with the corruption of human flesh. This basic philosophical assumption when applied to the Christian gospel led to two well-known [C]hristological heresies in the second century, Cerinthianism and Docetism…Both of these schools of thought attempted to understand Jesus in ways that were compatible with philosophical currents of the time, and both denied the humanity of Jesus, though each in a different way.*

How does this religious philosophical dominance of Roman society at the time of the early Christian Church lend credence that the Gospel (life, death, and Resurrection of Jesus) as believed, preached, and taught by the Disciples of Jesus was true and based on historical fact?

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At the same time, how is there some agreement between Christianity and the Plato inspired philosophy of the day?

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Let's take a moment to review the supplemental chart comparing Gnosticism, Docetism, and Cerinthianism that accompanies this study.

Scholars debate how established any of these heresies were at the time the Apostle John wrote his Books of the Bible. In general, Gnosticism came later than Cerinthianism and Docetism. However, Cerinthianism was started by a man named Cerinthus who was a contemporary of John in the latter part of the first century A.D. and likely lived in Asia minor where John lived. Even though there is no record that the two ever met, the Churches with which John interacted and oversaw officially or unofficially were likely impacted by early forms of Cerinthianism or teachings consistent with Cerinthianism. Dr. Schuchard takes the position that John was refuting an early form of Cerinthianism but not the fully established heresy itself. Others disagree. We will not engage in that debate, but as we go through the **Epistles of John**, be on the lookout for references that refute Cerinthianism in any form. For example, let's re-read **John 1:1 – 14** and **1 John 1:1 – 4**. How do these verses take on Cerinthianism, Docetism, and/or Gnosticism.

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With that introduction, let's look again at **1 John 1:1 – 4**.

Besides God coming in the flesh as our Lord and Savior Jesus, what else is John establishing in these verses?

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Compare these verses to **John 17:1 – 3, 20 – 22**. How do all of these verses change our thinking about the traditional definition of "eternal life" being that we live forever?

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What does verse four tell us about the reason why John is writing this epistle?

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From a doctrinal perspective, how is John setting the stage for the heresies that he will be addressing relative to the "us" that John is referencing?

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What does John mean by fellowship with "us"? Who is the "us"?

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John continues that fellowship with "us" means, in reality, fellowship with God? What does fellowship with God mean – i.e. what is the difference between knowing about God vs knowing God?

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John goes on to state that fellowship with **"the Father and with His Son, Jesus Christ"** (ESV), goes hand in hand with the other overall goal of his letter **"so that our joy may be complete."** (ESV)

Who is the "our" of "our joy" referring to?

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Does the text support that John already experiences that joy? Why or why not?

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What is(are) the purpose(s) of that joy?

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