

1, 2, 3 John: Measuring Authentic Christianity Introduction

Is what Christians believe about Jesus important? Is it important for Christians to love one another? Is it important that Christians obey God's commands?

First John answers yes to all of these questions. Do you? One wonders how seriously Christians take these questions and answers, however. Don't we tend to think we can be rather choosy about what we believe, whom we love, and how we live? After all, post-modern ideas suggest that it's pretty much up to us.

First John insists, though, that it's not "pretty much up to us." In fact, this letter sets forth definite standards of belief, love, and ethical conduct. These standards measure the reality of one's Christian profession. As we study this letter, we will see that it emphasizes these standards. A classic commentary refers to these standards as tests of eternal life in 1 John: belief, love, righteousness.¹ Indeed, this same commentary states that 1 John treats these truths in "spiral" form, returning to them over and over.

As with many of the writings of the New Testament, we do not know all we might wish to know about the situation to which the Letters of John were written. So we must do our best to understand these letters while still wishing to know more about them. Consider this scenario.

Somewhere in the late first-century world, a congregation of Christians was engaged in serious struggle over the heart of the Christian gospel. First John was written to this congregation to encourage it to stay faithful to the genuine Christian gospel taught by the apostles rather than to follow false teachers and false teachings. False teachers evidently were seeking to lead the congregation astray. The root of the struggle was an intense controversy about the meaning of Jesus, especially as that meaning can be seen in the Gospel of John.² These false teachers were challenging the theology, behavior, and unity of the church. They taught a perverted gospel, a gospel that failed to affirm the full truth about Jesus, God's Son.

A major error in this perverted gospel was that it denied Jesus' genuine humanity, viewing him only as a divine being. This perverted gospel affected not just belief but behavior, encouraging the notion that a Christian could not sin. The idea was that what one did in the body did not matter since this divine being had not really entered into the material world. Thus, obeying God's ethical commands and walking as Jesus had walked was not necessary. This perverted gospel further suggested that Jesus' sacrifice was somehow ineffectual and even relatively unimportant. A further result of these confusing teachings was division among Christians, Christians whom Jesus had prayed would be united (see the Gospel of John, chapter 17).

¹ Robert Law, The Tests of Life, a Study of the First Epistle of St. John, 3rd ed. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1909, 1913), chapter 1.

² Raymond E. Brown, The Epistles of John, The Anchor Bible, vol. 30 (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1982), xi.

The Letters of John counter such perversions of the gospel and those who promote them. First John calls these Christians—and us—to believe in Christ as the One in whom God "became flesh" (John 1:14); to love one another; and to behave ethically. First John provides a detailed exposition of these instructions. Second John, a brief letter to a congregation, instructs the congregation not to provide hospitality and support to those who teach otherwise. Third John, a brief letter written to an individual, encourages support for faithful Christian missionaries and deals with a leadership problem in the church.

We refer to these three letters as "the Letters of John." The Second and Third Letters of John identify themselves, however, as being from "the elder" (2 John 1; 3 John 1). The body of 1 John contains no identification of the writer at all. Its title, as with the titles of other New Testament books, dates to the second century AD.³ By the late fourth century, the idea had developed that all three letters were written by the Apostle John, although some considered "the elder" to be a different person from the Apostle John.⁴ We would do well to acknowledge, with our early Christian brothers and sisters, that we do not know as much about the authorship of these letters as we would like to know. More important than authorship is the message and even more important is that Christians for centuries have considered these letters to be Holy Scripture.

When we study these letters seriously, we will find their teachings to be challenging. The first challenge will be actually to understand the text. The writer of the most detailed commentary on 1 John cites a saying that "every sentence in 1 John can be interpreted in three different ways!"⁵ The Greek of 1 John is simple, so simple that this letter is generally the first New Testament book read by the beginning student of New Testament Greek. However, actually translating the text and understanding its meaning is not that easy. After understanding the text, the next challenge is to apply it with intelligence and care to our own life situation.

Whatever you may have thought of these letters before this study, you will consider them differently afterward. This study of these three brief letters will call for your best thinking and for a willingness to open yourself to God's message for life today.

³ Brown, The Epistles of John, 5.

⁴ Brown, The Epistles of John, 11-12.

⁵ Brown, The Epistles of John, x.

Session 1	Living for the God Who Really Came	1 John 1:1—2:2
Session 2	Tests for Knowing God	1 John 2:3-11,18-27
Session 3	Being God's Children	1 John 2:28—3:10
Session 4	Down-to-Earth Love	1 John 3:11-18,23-24; 4:7-21
Session 5	Faith Is the Victory	1 John 5
Session 6	Be Wise, Be Generous	2 John 1-11; 3 John 1-8