

Theological Themes in 1, 2, and 3 John

I. Introduction

A theological theme can be defined as a topic or idea that identifies or describes a truth about God (Father, Son, or Holy Spirit), his saving work, or any aspect of man and the world as God views them. We learn how God views them through revealed Scripture.

A Christian reader does not require a technical method to recognize theological themes in John's letters. We can recognize these themes intuitively by reading Scripture alert to what it says about God, humans, sin, and salvation. The basic saving message of the Bible—the good news of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ—is clear without specialist training or instruction.

Yet for advanced understanding, for ministry (*diakonia*) training, and for equipping other believers (Eph. 4:12), an organized and thorough overview of the several theological themes in John's letters is called for. In the study below, we will view these themes in light of a specific question:

What does John have to say to Christians who are dying for their faith, and to Christians who are living with their bloodless "religion"?

This question assumes that some are willing to die for their faith. John's letters are an encouragement to the very highest level of courage, loyalty, and sacrifice in Christ's service.

Others, in John's time and ours, face the temptation to languish in a bloodless "religion" that makes low demands. Some (or many) are not so zealous or committed that they would lay down their life rather than deny Christ if this were required of them. John writes to warn weak or false believers and to call them back to the costly but glorious truth of Christ.

II. Why should we think that John in his letters has special insight into this question?

- A. Like all of Scripture, 1–3 John are inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Tim. 3:16–17). God can use his word to uphold his people in their darkest hour of trial, as he did Jesus in his temptation who quoted Deuteronomy in withstanding Satan (see Matthew 4), or as the Psalms upheld Jesus as he quoted from them on the cross.
- B. John writes with pastoral concern for people who may be deceiving themselves about sin and the darkness in their lives. They claim to have fellowship with God but they walk in darkness (see 1 John 1:6, 8, 10). They have a "bloodless" religion that will enable them to avoid persecution as they stray from Christ and follow "the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already" (1 John 4:3).
- C. John knows the trauma of suffering as he writes—not his own martyrdom, but the death of others dear to him. He has witnessed and been affected by trauma,¹ which makes him

¹ On trauma and its lasting effects see Bessel van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain Mind and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

a credible guide for those facing real or possible trauma due to their commitment to Christ.

1. The trauma of seeing Jesus die on the cross, including the spear into his torso: John 19:34–35 “But one of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and at once there came out blood and water. He who saw it has borne witness—his testimony is true, and he knows that he is telling the truth—that you also may believe.” Or think of Jesus’ arrest (with a man’s ear cut off; John 18:10) and John’s close escape from arrest with Jesus (18:8–9: Jesus answered, “I told you that I am he. So, if you seek me, let these men go.” This was to fulfill the word that he had spoken: “Of those whom you gave me I have lost not one.”) John knew personally of Jesus’ ability to save his followers from harm.
 2. The trauma of arrest, imprisonment, and beating. In the earliest days of the church John was among the apostles who were arrested and imprisoned (Acts 5:18), freed by an angel (5:19), tried before the Sanhedrin who wanted to kill the apostles including John (5:26–33), and finally beaten before being released (5:40–42). John had personal experience of arrest, physical suffering, and the threat of death for faithful gospel proclamation. He also knew the miracle of divine deliverance.
 3. The trauma of John’s brother James being the second known martyr in the early church. Peter, James, and John were Jesus’ closest associates, and James was arrested and killed: Acts 12:1 “About that time Herod the king laid violent hands on some who belonged to the church.”² He killed James the brother of John with the sword,³ and when he saw that it pleased the Jews, he proceeded to arrest Peter also.” John was no stranger to the fear and danger that grip a persecuted church. Perhaps he witnessed Stephen’s stoning (Acts 7:54–60).
 4. The trauma of the death of James the (half) brother of Jesus. Along with Peter and John, this James was pastor of the Jerusalem church (see Gal. 2:9; Acts 15). Ancient reports say he was killed for refusing to deny Christ in public ca. AD 64. John would have carried the memory of James and his murder to the grave.
 5. John lived with the shameful memory of wishing to call fire down from heaven to destroy some Samaritans (Luke 9:54). Have you ever deeply willed someone’s death? John did, and Jesus rebuked him for it (Luke 9:55). We assume he was later forgiven. But such misjudgments still mark us long after we have committed them (recall Paul’s memory of his persecution of Christians: 1 Cor 15:9; Gal. 1:13; 1 Tim. 1:13).
 6. John would have witnessed (we do not know at what distance) the siege and destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans in the late AD 60s. Many thousands of his fellow Jews died and doubtless many messianic Jews (Jewish Christians) with them. John and other Christians survived by obeying a warning they remembered from Jesus: they fled the city (Luke 21:20–24). The sacking of Jerusalem may be compared to the rape of Nanjing which began in late 1937. The fall of Jerusalem would be another traumatic experience that qualified John to write honestly about faith in Christ through times of trial, suffering, and death.
- D. John’s letters are not sanitized, abstract musings about ideas. They come from a beloved

disciple of Jesus who had witnessed death and lived in a community constantly threatened by arrest and possibly execution (like Stephen, John's brother James, and John's co-pastor James the brother of Jesus). John could therefore speak with gentleness yet authority both to those facing possible death and to those whose faith was lax and who did not know Christ at all: 1 John 5:12 "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life."

III. Theological concepts in John's letters: an empirical approach

While every statement in Scripture (accurately interpreted) is true, we observe that biblical writers place emphasis on what they talk the most about. In other words,

frequency (of mention) *implies focus* (the emphasis of a biblical book).

For general ministry purposes, the search for theological themes should center on what is most prominent in a biblical book. When the Greek text of John's letters are analyzed,² we find a dozen most-frequent words that summarize John's theological message.

Major Significant Words in John's Letters and Their Relevance to the Question:

What does John have to say to Christians who are dying for their faith, and to Christians who are living with their bloodless "religion"?

The theological themes summarized below (with supporting Scripture verses) are:

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|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 1. God | 7. love |
| 2. loving | 8. sin |
| 3. knowing (more experiential) | 9. knowing (more principial) |
| 4. abiding, remaining | 10. hearing |
| 5. world | 11. commandment |
| 6. Son | 12. Father |

In the chart below, after mention of each theme and its times of occurrence, there is a comment (left column) on what John's letters have to say to Christians who are or soon may be dying for their faith. There is also a comment (right column) on what John's letters have to say to those whose faith is lax or lacking. Bible verses from John's letters support each comment.

² Numbers in the charts in this section come from Andreas Köstenberger and Raymond Bouchoc, *The Book Study Concordance of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2003), 1415.

1 John (2 Jn, 3 Jn in parentheses)	
1. θεός, God 62x ³ (2x, 3x)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: For believers of all ages and stages of faith in Christ, the Eternal One defeats the evil one through the word that he implants in his people. Through this word they overcome all evil and fear.</p> <p>1 John 2:14 I write to you, fathers, because you know him who is from the beginning. I write to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: Those whose talk is not matched by a faith expressing itself in obedience are deceiving themselves, perhaps deceiving others, but certainly not deceiving God.</p> <p>1 John 2:4–5 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him, but whoever keeps his word, in him truly the love of God is perfected.</p>
2. ἀγαπάω, I love 28x (2x, 1x)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: A sign of deep love for God is love for fellow believers ("the brothers," which is inclusive of both men and women). Such love assures us that we have (eternal) life beyond death in this world.</p> <p>1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: We abide in death—we lack assurance of eternal life—if our regard for fellow believers is tepid or absent.</p> <p>1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.</p>
3. γινώσκω, I know 25x (1x, 0)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: Christ's death for us equips his followers to trust the Father if he calls us to give our lives in his service. His selfless acts of love for us translate into our selfless acts of love for others.</p> <p>1 John 3:16 By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: Some do not listen to the full apostolic word. They follow "the spirit of error." This happens when people do not know God and are not from God---they have not truly become his children (John 1:12–13).</p> <p>1 John 4:6 We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error</p>

³ x= number of occurrences. The word "God" appears 62x in 1 John, 2x in 2 John, and 3x in 3 John.

4. μένω, I remain, abide 24x (3x, 0)

John's message for the faithful dying:
God's word that saves us from the start imparts his living presence in us. His living word keeps us close to the Son and to the Father in any and all circumstances.

1 John 2:24 Let what you heard from the beginning **abide** in you. If what you heard from the beginning **abides** in you, then you too will **abide** in the Son and in the Father.

John's message for the lax:
In the current age many "Christians" decide to depart from the clear teaching of Scripture, "the teaching of Christ." This indicates lack of a saving relationship with God. This is especially true if the departure concerns the doctrine of Christ.

2 John 9 Everyone who goes on ahead and does not **abide** in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever **abides** in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.

5. κόσμος, world, the created order 23x (1x, 0)

John's message for the faithful dying:
The world seems permanent, but it is passing. Those who honor God's unchanging will find life in his unchanging presence. The world does not understand this and hates those whose highest aim is God's will and not human aspirations. Expect this antagonism! God will repay—your faithfulness and the world's opposition.

1 John 2:17 And the **world** is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

1 John 3:13 Do not be surprised, brothers, that the **world** hates you.

John's message for the lax:
The world is full of religious substitutes and misrepresentations. The world gives these spirits and prophets a hearing. Beware of falling in with them.

1 John 4:1 Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the **world**.

1 John 4:5 They are from the **world**; therefore they speak from the **world**, and the **world** listens to them.

6. υἱός, son 22x (always Son; 2x, 0)

John's message for the faithful dying:
Believing in the Son carries the assurance of eternal life, because "he is the true God and eternal life" (below).

1 John 5:11 And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his **Son**.

1 John 5:13 I write these things to you who believe in the name of the **Son** of God, that you may know that you have eternal life.

1 John 5:20 And we know that the **Son** of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true; and we are in him who is true, in his **Son** Jesus Christ. He is the true God and eternal life.

John's message for the lax:
Saving faith is not passive assent to certain religious ideas or compliance with a moral code. It is rejection of indifference or hostility to Jesus as the defining manifestation of God the Father. To minimize Jesus and his kingly status ("the Christ") is to deny God.

1 John 2:22 Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, he who denies the Father and the **Son**.

1 John 2:23 No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the **Son** has the Father also.

7. ἀγάπη, love 18x (2x, 1x)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: God's love is the place of refuge for the faithful. His love lifts us above fear of his judgment as that love is perfected in us.</p> <p>1 John 4:16 So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. ¹⁷ By this is love perfected with us, so that we may have confidence for the day of judgment, because as he is so also are we in this world. ¹⁸ There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: We compromise our souls, even if we profess faith in Christ, if our love is actually directed to anything other than the Father, who sent the Son.</p> <p>1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him.</p>
8. ἁμαρτία, sin 17x (0, 0)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: Believers face death with hope because they know forgiveness of their sins. God shows his love in sending the Son to satisfy God's wrath against sin. Fellowship with others in Christ provides strength in suffering.</p> <p>1 John 1:7 But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. John 4:10 In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: Some commit sin knowingly, calculating that they can always get forgiveness. Jesus appeared to reduce sin in our lives, not to encourage it by endless leniency.</p> <p>1 John 3:4 Everyone who makes a practice of sinning also practices lawlessness; sin is lawlessness. ⁵ You know that he appeared in order to take away sins, and in him there is no sin.</p>
9. οἶδα, I know 15x (0, 1x)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: The Christian hope is the return of their Lord and Savior. The day will come when we will see him in his glory. This confident expectation upholds believers in hours of testing and loss.</p> <p>1 John 3:2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: A sign of the presence of Christ is fervent, self-sacrificial love for others. Absence of this love means a person has not found life in Christ.</p> <p>1 John 3:14 We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers. Whoever does not love abides in death.</p>

10. ἀκούω, I hear 14x (1x, 1x)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: God hears when his people cry out to him. We have his ear, and he does what is best, wisest, and most loving according to his might and purpose when we pray in times of danger and need.</p> <p>1 John 5:14 And this is the confidence that we have toward him, that if we ask anything according to his will he hears us. 15 And if we know that he hears us in whatever we ask, we know that we have the requests that we have asked of him.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: Love for God and obedience to God and his commandments are interrelated, not antithetical. It is a mistake to lower ethical standards supposing that a loving God is not zealous for compliance with his will for his people.</p> <p>2 John 6 And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments; this is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it.</p>
11. ἐντολή, commandment 14x (4x, 0)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: Faithfulness to God's commandments can lead to abuse and arrest in many social settings. But believers are bound to belief in Christ and love for others. In this love, God is with them and vice versa. God gives the living assurance of his Holy Spirit.</p> <p>1 John 3:23 And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.</p> <p>24 Whoever keeps his commandments abides in God, and God in him. And by this we know that he abides in us, by the Spirit whom he has given us.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: Faith in Christ produces an appetite for learning and doing what he commands. Because God's commandments are a sign of his love, as we learn to do his will, those commandments grow to be "not burdensome." If they are too burdensome for someone to observe, it is a sign that faith in Christ is weak or lacking.</p> <p>1 John 2:4 Whoever says "I know him" but does not keep his commandments is a liar, and the truth is not in him</p> <p>1 John 5:3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.</p>
12. πατήρ 14x (13x "Father" = God; 4x, 0)	
<p>John's message for the faithful dying: The magnificence and magnitude of the Father's love, by which we are made his children through Christ's sacrifice, gives steadfastness and assurance of divine protection of our souls in the end. We also understand and expect our alienation from the world, for the world is alienated from the Father.</p> <p>1 John 3:1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.</p>	<p>John's message for the lax: Love of and from the Father is the antithesis of love for the world. To confess the Son as Lord over the world and our saving treasure in the world—this and nothing less is to have the Father. To love the world inordinately is to cut oneself off from the Father's love.</p> <p>1 John 2:15 Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. 16 For all that is in the world—the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life—is not from the Father but is from the world.</p>

