

# **Dr. Robert Yarbrough, The Johannine Epistles, Session 1 – Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters**

This is Dr. Robert Yarbrough and his teaching on the Johannine Epistles, Balancing Life in Christ, Session 1, Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters.

Hello, we're beginning a study on the Johannine Epistles right now, and if by chance you're looking for an exposition of the book of 1 John, then you need to go to Lecture 5 in this series. If you want 2 John, that's Lecture 4. If you want 3 John, that's Lecture 3. But in this particular lecture, Lecture 1, we're going to look at the author, the date, and the setting of John's letters.

And in the next lecture after that, we're going to look at themes in John's letters, just to kind of pull things together before we go into the text later on. So let's pause and ask for God's blessing on our time in these lectures. Heavenly Father, thank you for Holy Scripture.

Thank you for the testimony of the Apostle John to the coming of Christ and the ministry of Christ. Thank you for his love for the church, as he's come to be known as a beloved disciple. And we pray that we would sense that love, that we would sense the truth in these letters, that we would understand the commandments that are in them, and that we would grow in a balanced life in Christ through their study.

We pray in Jesus' name. Amen. That's the title I'm giving to these lectures: Balancing Life in Christ.

And before we go too far down the road in looking at the letters, I want to look at who wrote them, when he may have written them, and what the setting of John's letters is. First of all, as far as the author, there was never any doubt throughout the history of the church that John, the hand-picked disciple of Jesus, was the author. He's called John, the son of Zebedee.

His brother was James. You know, Peter, James, and John were the three disciples closest to Jesus. And John and his brother James were called the Sons of Thunder.

So, Peter usually gets a reputation for being temperamental, but John and James also, it seems, were people with deep passions in what they stood for. At one time, they wanted to call down fire from heaven on some Samaritans, and Jesus rebuked them for that. So, they were a spirited pair of brothers.

I'll mention later, James was eventually martyred, but John went on to a long ministry, and until around the year 1800 or so, everybody who took the Bible seriously thought John the son of Zebedee, the disciple of Jesus, the beloved disciple, that he wrote John's gospel, he wrote the three epistles, he wrote the book of Revelation. Since around the 1800s, Johannine authorship of these books has been cast in doubt, but there are good books like Donald Guthrie's Introduction to the New Testament, or the Introduction to the New Testament by Carson and Mu, Don Carson and Douglas Mu, and also an even more recent book called The Cradle, The Cross, and The Crown, edited by Andreas Kostenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles. They have a very good account in there of the authorship of the Johannine Gospel Letters and Apocalypse, and I'll just conclude by saying I don't think there's any compelling reason to doubt that John the son of Zebedee authored these letters.

And so, you know, this is not a technical lecture on introductory issues, and so I'm just going to go with the consensus of church history and what I'm convinced of by the evidence in the letters themselves when you compare it to the gospel, when you compare it to Revelation, and when you look at what we know about first and second century church history, I think it makes a lot of sense to continue to think that John wrote these letters. As far as when he wrote them, we can't locate the time of writing with precision. There is reason to think that he wrote these letters later in life, and ancient reports place John in the region of Ephesus after the fall of Jerusalem.

Jerusalem fell in the late 70s and 60s. There are traditions that say that when the Roman army advanced on Jerusalem from the north, they had conquered Galilee, and they were putting down a Jewish civil war in Jerusalem that had begun earlier in the 70s and 60s. As the Roman army sneered, the disciples of Jesus remembered his warning that when you see the armies come to the city, flee to the hills.

And disciples fled, and John ended up in Revelation, and he stayed there until his death in the 80s and 90s. This goes along with the picture that we get from the early chapters of the book of Revelation, where John is in exile on Patmos, which is an island off the coast of Ephesus. And he writes from that island to the seven churches of Asia, which is the Roman province of which Ephesus was the capital.

So, we can say, I think, that John writes as a pastoral leader to these seven churches. He writes Revelation, and I think it's in that context that he writes the letters. You can understand John's letters as arising in the time leading up to John's banishment to Patmos.

That's one scenario in which he goes from Jerusalem to Ephesus. He ministers from Ephesus to the major centers around there with churches, the seven churches of that

Roman province called Asia. And that he writes his letters in that general time frame and addressing those communities of faith.

I have often imagined, I can't confirm this, but I've imagined that he might have written these letters while he was in exile and hoping for release, which he talks about, that he hopes he can come to the people he's writing to. He says that in 2 John, verse 12. He says it in 3 John, verse 14.

And so, I think there's a possibility that all three letters were written in his exile, and I'll revisit that thought as we look at each of the letters. One thing we can say about the setting of 1 John, because of what 1 John 2.19 says, is that there has been a church split, or what's sometimes called schism. 1 John 2.19 says they went out from us.

So, somebody has left the congregation or congregations. Remember, they had house churches in these times. So, when he addresses a church in a locale, it might just be one congregation, but it might be a number of small gatherings that gather in houses.

And he says, they went out from us, but they were not of us. And this is a ray of light on the life of the early church. The gospel would be shared, people would come to faith, what we call a congregation would form.

And we see this all through church history, that wherever there is truth, pretty quickly, something that strays from the truth arises. There are rival understandings, sometimes it's from local religious or local social convictions that stand in the way of the gospel doing its work. And so, friction arises, and sometimes churches are taken over by local forces.

It's called syncretism. The church adopts its own native views, and they overcome what was brought in from the outside by the gospel. Other times, it's more of a personal nature.

There's an apostolic leader like John who says he plants a church, and then in the course of time, somebody is jealous, or somebody is off in their reasoning, and they decide they know more than John does or whoever planted the church. And so, there's friction. And there was friction in the church that John writes about in 1 John 2, and these people went out from us, John says, but they were not of us.

And if they had been like us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they are not all of us. And I'm quoting here from the ESV, the English Standard Version.

So, of the three epistles, 1 John is clearly the dominant one, although I think 2 and 3 John are significant. But 1 John, as an epistle, is meant to stabilize congregations who knew of this split and who may have been tempted to break away from John's church or churches, or maybe to adjust their doctrine or their practice in the direction of the people who went out. It's been theorized that 3 John was a cover letter to a man named Gaius.

It certainly is written to a man named Gaius. But it could have been a cover letter to Gaius, who was an ally of John. And that's clear when you read 3 John.

John and Gaius are on good terms. And going back to my idea about Patmos, John could have been in exile on Patmos, or he could have been in hiding on the mainland due to opposition. Or maybe he was just too aged to travel anymore, and he couldn't distribute 1 John to churches himself.

And when we get to 3 John, we see somebody named Demetrius, and he's mentioned favorably in verse 12. So it could be that Demetrius was the person who delivered John's three letters to Gaius. In 3 John 9, in this letter to Gaius, we read about Diotrephes, who opposed John, and the gospel message that John stood for.

In 3 John 9, John writes, I have written something to the church, he writes to Gaius. Gaius, I've written something to the church. And he could have meant 2 John, or 1 John, or both.

And so 2 John may have been a letter to Gaius' church, encouraging the church that Gaius was in to receive 1 John, for their own strengthening, and then to assist Gaius in distributing it to other churches. So, the three letters together can be viewed as a unified apostolic statement to a person, Gaius, 3 John, to an individual church, the elect lady and her children, 2 John verse 1, that is a congregation and its members, and then to all the churches who receive 1 John. And it may be that these letters would have been coming into the church at Ephesus and the surrounding churches of Asia, who were later addressed in Revelation 1 through 3, starting with the Ephesian church, which we'll look at in just a minute.

So that's an imaginary setting, it's the only thing we can do, we can look at 2nd-century, 3rd-century testimony, we can read the letters themselves, we can view them as fragmentary and not having any relation to each other. Against that is the observation that 3rd John by itself and 2nd John by themselves are so inconsequential that it's hard to imagine why they would have been preserved if they didn't have, you know, some importance beyond what they would have if you cut them off from any other contact with other letters. And I'm thinking here of the introduction written by Luke Timothy Johnson, he's not the first, but he's one who in recent generation or so, you know, wrote about these three letters as kind of a packet, and we should read them in conjunction with each other, and if we do, then

the scenario that I just sketched out makes sense, that 3rd John is the cover letter, Gaius gets 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John from somewhere, wherever John is, he reads the letter that's to him, and then he's going to read 2nd John or have 2nd John read in his church, and that's going to command then 1st John to the church that reads it, which I think it makes the most sense to say it's the church at Ephesus, and then from there it's going to spread or its message is going to be spread to the other churches in Asia, the other seven churches, or other six churches, who may be tempted to go in the direction of this schismatic group, maybe headed by Diotrephes.

So to wrap up what I want to say about the author and the setting, I want to revisit what I think John wrote to the church at Ephesus, we could look at all seven of the letters, but we don't have time to do that, and that would be more fitting in the lectures on Revelation, which I'm sure are somewhere else on this website, but I want to look at the church at Ephesus and make some observations about what we know, what we see about this church. You can look at your own copy of Revelation 2 verses 1 through 7, it starts out by saying, to the angel the church in Ephesus write, the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands, and in the larger context of the book of Revelation, we know this is Christ speaking to the church, to the angel of the church, some think that's an angel assigned to the church, some think that this represents the Holy Spirit, some thinks it represents the messenger, an angel could be the messenger, could represent the spiritual leadership of the church, the real point is the message, and we see in verse 2 the words, I know your works, your toil, and your patient endurance, and how you cannot bear with those who are evil, but have tested those who call themselves apostles, and are not, and you found them to be false. So these are congregations at Ephesus, or I say churches, I'm thinking of congregations, these are congregations with commitment and discernment.

They have works, they have toil, they have endurance, you can't bear with those who are evil, that's discernment, you've tested them, those who call themselves apostles, and that's the picture we get in 1 John 2, 19, these people went out from them, but they were not of them, so they're breaking with the we that John uses, which I think refers to himself and others who represent the apostolic message in its fullness and its truth. The church at Ephesus is strongly commended here for its past track record of integrity in gospel living, in gospel reasoning, in gospel doctrinal formulation. He goes on in verse 3 to say, I know you are enduring patiently, and bearing up for my name's sake, and you have not grown weary.

I mean, they're the first church addressed in the seven letters to the churches in Asia, and they're probably the strongest church. I mean, Ephesus was one of the great cities of the Roman Empire by comparison, the little places like Laodicea and Smyrna, they're villages by comparison, and so he's commending the mother church, the big church, the powerful church, for their stamina. But there is an issue.

But I have this against you, he says in verse 4, that you've abandoned the love you had at first. So the church at Ephesus was losing touch with one of the stamps of apostolic Christianity, especially as John characterizes it, and that's agape, you know, the love that Christ showed, the love that is so much an attribute of God, and a love that's so much a part of the community of God in Old Testament times and New Testament times, when they're right with God, and when they're living in fellowship with Him and with each other. But if you're a Christian, then you know, you know, staying sharp in your Christian walk, and remember, we're talking about balancing the Christian life, it's hard to stay balanced, it's hard to stay alive and vital, it's easy to get dull.

It's not hard to sin, it's not hard to turn away from God in small ways, or God forbid, but in large ways, you know, Christians sometimes they lose their way. And John says, you have abandoned the love you had at first. We don't know what the at first means, does that mean when John got there, Paul had already planted churches at Ephesus, and Apollos had ministered at Ephesus, so Ephesus had, you know, some decades of history, probably, by the time 1st John is written, so we don't know details, but however well they started out, they've lost their contact with this good beginning.

And, you know, we should just pause to reflect that this is a characteristic of human beings and gospel reception, the first generation are often quite zealous, you know, we go from darkness to light, and we're so grateful, and maybe we live with integrity, but then, you know, the next generation comes along, and sometimes they struggle to understand the zeal that their parents had, and then the next generation comes along, and with every generation, there are new opportunities, and God's grace can be renewed, but there's also the danger of formalism, and the danger of traditionalism, and people have a form of Christian religion, but, you know, the real force of it, the purity of it, the vigor of God's love, and its freshness, it's not there, and so that's a problem at Ephesus, as John represents them, they're losing touch with, or they've lost touch with God's agape love. So, he doesn't just condemn them and move on, he says, remember. Remember, therefore, from where you have fallen, you know, go back to where you took the wrong turn.

This is a church, or group of churches, that needs to remember, it needs to repent, which means to turn, or return, and he goes on to say, repent and do the works you did at first. Now, we're going to see later on how intertwined faith, and works, and love are, and when he mentions any one of those three, he's implying the other two. He's not saying, this is just a religion of works, so go back to the beginning, and the beginning was works, and so that's it, just go back and do those works again.

Whatever works he's talking about, they did it because they received the gospel that changed their hearts, and it implanted the love of God in them, and so there was

love involved in their works, and that all came through faith. Paul says, faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God, and that's true of Old Testament and New. God addresses his people in the Old Testament, it's called the Shema, hear O Israel, and as God's people hear, God enters into a relationship with them, and their actions change, their works show their relationship with God.

So he says, go back and do the works you did at first, renew your faith, be renewed in the love of God. So that's, you know, another feature of life in the church at Ephesus. Verse 6 says, yet this you have, so he went from commendation, to questioning them in verse 4, to telling them how to remedy it in verse 5, and now in verse 6, back to the positive, yet this you have, you hate the works of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate, and if you look up Nicolaitans, you'll see that we don't know much about the Nicolaitans, but from this context, we can say that these were people who were not obeying the commandments of Christianity, the commandments of Christ, the commandments of God.

So, verse 6 is saying these are churches that, you know, Jesus commends because they're retaining the necessary zeal for God's redemptive commands, the things he tells God's people to believe, the things he tells them to do, the love he urges them to exercise. From what little we know about the Nicolaitans, it seems that they were a group in rebellion against, you know, the gospel and its manifestation, its typical manifestation in the apostolic era. And there's very strong language here.

Christ says, which I also hate, God through Christ, God in Christ. He loves righteousness. He loves it when he has fellowship with his people.

He loves it when he fellowships with sinners through sinners, turning away from darkness and receiving the light that he brings into human existence. And he detests it when people persist in darkness, or when they step into the light, and they may benefit from the presence of the light, but then they rebel. They turn against it.

They think they know more than the true community of faith does, than an apostle does, than the scriptures know and teach. So they give in to the impulse that is quite common in all of us, the impulse to rebel. I was just talking to a prominent Christian leader last night, and he was telling me about when he was in high school and how rebellious he was.

And he would stand outside his English classroom for one minute after the bell rang every day, and just come in intentionally one minute late. And he dressed kind of slovenly, and he had long hair, and you know, he looked unkempt, but he just had something in him in this class. He wanted to express himself and do it in a way that would offend the teacher.

And if you have children, sometimes you see that children have a rebellious spirit. And if you're married, sometimes your spouse will sense a rebellious spirit in you. So the Nicolaitans were people that Christ detested, because the things they did were out of line with what God calls and enables his people to do in congregations.

And so, however off the mark the Ephesians were tending to be, and so there are some words of correction in these verses, they haven't gone so far as to go with the Nicolaitans yet. And who knows, maybe it was a Nicolaitan impulse that we see in 1 John 2.19, where people went out, but they were not of the group that John addresses. We don't know these things, but these are certainly possibilities.

He concludes, Christ concludes in verse 7, and of course John is writing these things, so we can also say John concludes, he who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers, that's a word that occurs in 1 John, to the one who conquers I will grant to eat of the tree of life, which is the paradise of God. And I think that refers to the fullness of communion with God in this life, and then also the joys and the celebration of the life to come in heaven.

But the church or churches at Ephesus were churches with promise, especially as they would continue to hear the message, the message they had from the beginning. The message that they were struggling to stay sharp, because of this tendency to abandon the love they had at first. But a group that had the potential to be renewed, to stay strong against Nicolaitan and other hostile impulses, and to be renewed so that they would receive the fullness of God's promise in this life, and the life to come.

So that wraps up a quick look at the author, the date, and the setting of John's letters, as we look at the Johannine Epistles, Balancing Life in Christ. And that's the end of this first lecture.

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