

Johannine Epistles, Session 1: Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters

Lecture Series: Balancing Life in Christ

Session: Session 1

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Abstract

In this lecture, Dr. Robert Yarbrough establishes the historical, apostolic, and pastoral framework for studying the Johannine Epistles under the overarching theme of balancing life in Christ. He defends the traditional attribution of authorship to John the son of Zebedee in late first-century Ephesus and proposes that 1, 2, and 3 John functioned as a unified apostolic packet sent to stabilize congregations facing a serious theological schism. Drawing explicit parallels to Christ's message to the Ephesian church in Revelation 2, Yarbrough underscores the urgent necessity of maintaining doctrinal discernment while recovering foundational agape love.

Outline

I. Introduction and Overview of the Lecture Series

- A. Series Theme: "Balancing Life in Christ"
- B. Structural Scope and Lecture Roadmap
 - 1. Session 1: Author, Date, and Setting of John's Letters
 - 2. Session 2: Major Theological Themes across the Epistles
 - 3. Session 3: Exposition of 3 John
 - 4. Session 4: Exposition of 2 John
 - 5. Session 5: Exposition of 1 John
- C. Opening Prayer for Spiritual Understanding, Discernment, and Love

II. Author of the Johannine Epistles

- A. Traditional Apostolic Attribution
 - 1. John the son of Zebedee (Brother of James; "Sons of Thunder")
 - 2. Member of Jesus' inner circle alongside Peter and James
 - 3. Unanimous historic church consensus attributing the Gospel, Epistles, and Revelation to John until c. 1800

B. Modern Scholarly Debates and Defense of Authorship

1. Rise of 19th- and 20th-century critical skepticism regarding Johannine authorship
2. Scholarly defenses of apostolic authorship (Donald Guthrie, D.A. Carson & Douglas Moo, Andreas Köstenberger et al.)
3. Internal textual alignment, linguistic ties to the Gospel, and 1st/2nd-century historical evidence

III. Date and Historical Setting

A. Chronological Framework

1. Composition in John's later years (late first century A.D.)
2. Historical background of the Jewish War, Roman advance, and fall of Jerusalem (A.D. 60s–70s)
3. Relocation of Christian disciples and John's pastoral ministry to the region of Ephesus

B. Context of Banishment and Pastoral Care

1. Banishment to Patmos and leadership over the seven churches of Asia Minor
2. Possibility of letters written during exile or in hiding while desiring personal visits (2 John 12; 3 John 14)

IV. The Pastoral Crisis and Epistolary Packet Model

A. The Nature of the Theological Schism (1 John 2:19)

1. Factional separation: "They went out from us, but they were not of us"
2. Pressures of local syncretism, false teaching, and personal rivalries
3. Pastoral function of 1 John to stabilize believers tempted by schismatic doctrine

B. The Unified Three-Letter Packet Hypothesis (Luke Timothy Johnson)

1. 3 John: Cover letter to Gaius delivered by Demetrius (3 John 12)
2. 2 John: Letter to Gaius' local congregation ("the elect lady") endorsing 1 John
3. 1 John: Primary circular treatise addressing Ephesus and regional sister churches facing Diotrephes' opposition

V. Ephesian Church Profile and Theological Evaluation (Revelation 2:1–7)

A. Commendations for Orthodoxy and Stamina

1. Commended for toil, patient endurance, and moral intolerance of evil
2. Rigorous testing and repudiation of self-proclaimed false apostles
3. Firm rejection of the rebellious works of the Nicolaitans

B. The Critical Flaw: Abandonment of First Love

1. Loss of vibrant agape love despite structural orthodoxy and doctrinal vigor
2. Generational risks of spiritual apathy, traditionalism, and dead formalism

C. Pastoral Remedy and Exhortation

1. Threefold prescription: Remember where you fell, Repent, and Restore first works
2. Inseparable synthesis of faith, works, and agape love in Christian walk
3. Promise to overcomers: Access to the tree of life in the paradise of God