

New Testament History and Literature — The Johannine Epistles

Author: Dr. Dave Mathewson | Session 33

Sponsored by Biblelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Johannine Epistles, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, Gnosticism, Secessionists, Spiritual Assurance, Indwelling Seed, Diotrephes, House Churches

Abstract

In this lecture on the Johannine Epistles, Dr. Dave Mathewson examines the historical background, pastoral purpose, and key theological themes of 1, 2, and 3 John. He explains that 1 John was written to offer spiritual assurance to a church wounded by secessionist false teachers who embraced proto-Gnostic tendencies and denied the physical incarnation of Jesus Christ. To ground their confidence, the author presents three cycling tests—mutual love, obedience to Christ's commands, and confessing Jesus in the flesh—while addressing the theological tension between the present reality of sinlessness and the ongoing need for forgiveness. Finally, Mathewson addresses 2 and 3 John as specific house-church communications that warn against platforming itinerant false teachers and confront internal power struggles caused by Diotrephes.

Outline

I. Introduction and Course Logistics

- A. Final week of formal lectures and upcoming exam schedule
 - 1. Lecture series completion during the current week
 - 2. Exam #4 scheduled for Monday following an extra-credit review session
- B. Transition within the General Epistles curriculum toward the Book of Revelation
- C. Opening prayer focused on divine faithfulness and secure hope in Jesus Christ

II. Classification, Authorship, and Context of the Johannine Epistles

- A. Categorization as General or Catholic Epistles
 - 1. Distinction between Pauline letters (specific locales) and universal/general epistles
 - 2. Anonymity of 1 John lacking standard epistolary greetings or named recipients
- B. Authorship attributed to John the Apostle
 - 1. External testimony from early Church Fathers linking 1, 2, and 3 John to John
 - 2. Internal claims of physical eyewitness contact ('seen with our eyes, touched with our hands')
 - 3. Later editorial addition of traditional titles (1, 2, 3 John)

III. Historical Background and Purpose of 1 John

- A. The threat of early proto-Gnostic heresy

- 1. Denigration of the physical material world in favor of purely spiritual salvation
- 2. Claim to secret, exclusive spiritual knowledge reserved for an elite few
- B. The secessionist crisis and spiritual abuse
 - 1. Infiltration and subsequent departure (secession) of false teachers from the congregation
 - 2. Believers left spiritually wounded and doubting their true status as God's children
- C. Primary pastoral purpose of 1 John
 - 1. Providing spiritual assurance of eternal life to believers (1 John 5:13)

IV. Core Theological Tests and Tensions in 1 John

- A. The three cycling tests of genuine faith and spiritual status
 - 1. Social/Ethical Test: Demonstrating active love for one another
 - 2. Moral Test: Walking in obedience to the commandments of Christ
 - 3. Christological Test: Confessing that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh (affirming true humanity)
- B. The theological tension regarding sin in the Christian life
 - 1. Absolute statement: Those born of God do not and cannot persist in sin (3:9)
 - 2. Practical reality: Claiming total sinlessness deceives oneself and makes God a liar (1:8-10)
 - 3. Reconciliation through 'already/not yet' eschatology and ongoing confession (1:9)

V. Specific Pastoral Situations in 2 and 3 John

- A. 2 John: Maintaining truth and house-church boundaries
 - 1. Self-identification as 'the elder' writing to 'the elect lady' (house church or leader)
 - 2. Prohibition against receiving or platforming itinerant false teachers (v. 9-10)
 - 3. Contextual understanding of first-century house-church worship vs. personal hospitality
- B. 3 John: Confronting local division and power struggles
 - 1. Absence of explicit false teaching or theological heresy in the letter
 - 2. Censure of Diotrephes for seeking personal power and creating division in the church

VI. Conclusion

- A. Summary of pastoral care and theological discernment across the Johannine letters
- B. Transition to final lectures covering the Book of Revelation