

INTRODUCTION

As we prepare to spend time in John's epistles I thought it would be a good time to refresh ourselves with who John was. We know the Apostle John through his proximity to Jesus Christ in the gospel accounts. What we know of John comes mainly through the Scriptures. He is one of the apostles who were known as the inner circle of Jesus along with Peter and James. John is a familiar figure in most of the scenes we read about in the Bible with Jesus and the other disciples. John was an outgoing and at times a volatile person; who like, many of us, matured in Christ over time. He was a man needed for his time and is needed for our time. His writings are bold and direct and dogmatic. I don't think there is another New Testament writer that is as unbending and direct as John is. He is confident in his writing and knows what the Lord has directed him to say. He is committed to truth as given by the Holy Spirit. John is an exclusive preacher much needed in our very inclusive times. Aristotle said, **"Tolerance and apathy are the last virtues of a dying society."** Aristotle's statement and John's writings were not only true for their time but they are true for our society, and unfortunately they are true for many churches that label themselves as "Christian" today.

These are great days in the life of the church. However, these are also days when Christian thinking can be loose; some view the scriptures as simply a set of guidelines. The church has become accepting, tolerant, and inclusive, and because of this the church is uncertain and lacking in doctrinal clarity. Many churches have

given themselves over to tolerance and are given to compromise to please society. This is a perfect time to hear from John. His epistles provide a powerful message of correction for a compromising, open-minded, permissive and the liberal thinking churches of his day and that same environment exists today in a number of churches and denominations.

JOHN'S LIFE

We know from our study of John's gospel account that he was the son of Zebedee and the younger brother of **James**. Zebedee and his sons were fishermen from the Sea of Galilee. James and John first were disciples of John the Baptist. James and John both held prominent positions for not only being among the first of the disciples to be called but also because of their relationship to Jesus among the apostles. Jesus referred to this pair collectively as "Boanerges" (*bo-an-erg-es*) translated "sons of thunder" in Mark 3:17. Although their normal nature seemed to be one of calm and gentle manner, when their patience was pushed to its limits, their anger became fierce and thunderous causing them to speak out like an untamed storm. At one point John and his brother James wanted to call down fire from heaven on a Samaritan town for their rejection of Jesus, but Jesus rebuked them in Luke 9:51-56. John survived his brother James by more than half a century after James became the second Christian to die a martyr's death, the first being Stephen. In the Book of Acts we read about James death in 44 AD, "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. This was during the days of Unleavened Bread." (Acts 12:1-3)

The inner circle of the disciples - Peter, James and John were the only witnesses of the raising of the daughter of Jairus (**ee-ah-i-ros**) a ruler of the synagogue recorded in Mark chapter 5. (Mark 5:37) It was these three who witnessed the Agony in Gethsemane (**gheth-say-man-ay**) more closely than the other disciples did. We read of this in Matthew 26, Mark 14 and Luke 24. It is these three that were the witnesses to Jesus' Transfiguration written in the gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark and Luke. (Mt. 17:1; Mk. 9:2-8 and Lk. 9:28-36)

From John's Gospel, Epistles and Revelation we know that John was a personal eyewitness of the life and work of **Jesus**. John lived for a long time in Asia Minor, today known as **Turkey** and was thoroughly acquainted with the conditions existing in the various Christian communities there. He had a position of authority recognized by all Christian communities as a leader of the church. Moreover, the Book of Revelation says that its author was on the island of Patmos "**for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus**" (Rev. 1:9) when he was honored with the vision contained in Book of Revelation. Patmos is a small rocky island off the west coast of Turkey where John was exiled.

John's writings confront the laxity in the church, the shallowness among the professed people of God and the lack of conviction about what is really true and what is not. John writes with simple words. He writes in clear certainties. He is firmly committed to establishing the absolute truth in the minds of his readers in the late first century and readers throughout history and this very day. I believe that our study of John's three epistles will bring a new sense of certainty to all who hear and understand. If there's anything lacking in modern evangelical thinking, it is certainty of truth. If you are already certain, John's gospel will make you stronger in your

certainty. If you are not certain of the truth of God's inspired Bible – then hold onto your hats as the wind of spiritual truth comes rushing in from the pen of John.

JOHN'S WRITINGS

John never identifies himself as the author in any of his writings; The Gospel According to John, 1st, 2nd and 3rd John and Revelation. This brings up the question, "How do we know John wrote them?" The answer to this question can be given in several ways.

First, we know John wrote them because that is the strong and consistent universal testimony of the early church. The universal, strong and consistent testimony of John's authorship can be traced all the way back to those people who knew him. Also, John lived the longest of all the apostles. He lived until the very end of the first century, probably dying around 98 to 99 A.D. His life overlaps many who knew Jesus and the generation following the apostles. When there is a universal attributing of these writings to John, and that tradition goes all the way back to the Church Fathers, this gives a solid foundation to believe in his authorship. There is even one early church leader, writer and historian by the name of Papias who bridged the generation after John. He knew John personally and called John, "**A living and abiding voice for God.**" Papias lived from 60 to 130 AD. Papias attested the writings attributed to John were in fact his.

Polycarp also knew John. Who was Polycarp? Polycarp was born into a Christian family in 69 AD. He identified himself as a disciple of John the Apostle. Polycarp was appointed Bishop of Smyrna (*smear-nah*) in Asia Minor today know as Turkey. **Polycarp** was arrested by civil authorities, who demanded he renounce his faith in

Christ. When he refused, he was burned at the stake in 156 AD. Ignatius (Ig-na-tius) of Antioch was also a student of John and was martyred by the Romans in 116 A.D. Letters he wrote to Polycarp and to the church at Smyrna have survived. The story of Polycarp's death is found in a letter from the church of Smyrna to one of the churches in Galatia and is the earliest record of Christian martyrdom outside the New Testament. Both Polycarp and Ignatius believed the writings we find in the Bible were those of John the Apostle.

Second, the very fact that John doesn't name himself is a strong argument for his authorship. Since only a well-known, only a prominent, in fact, only an Apostle called by Christ and recognized by the church at-large would venture to write his gospel account and epistles that he intended would have divine authority, divine impact and not use his name. For an Apostle to write demanding submission and obedience from his readers without identifying himself could only be done, if he were, in fact, an Apostle and recognized by his readers as such. All historical evidence leads us to conclude that John's writing period came at the end of his life, that it was in the last decade of the first century that John did his writing, including the Book of Revelation which is usually thought to have been given to John around the year 96 A.D. By that time, John is virtually the last man standing, the last remaining Apostle. When he writes it was unnecessary for him to identify himself, being the only Apostle left alive - everyone knew who he was.

Third, it was also consistent with John not to refer to himself by name. He refers to himself by descriptive phrases. He refers to himself, for example, as "the Apostle whom Jesus **loved**." He refers to himself as "the one who reclined near Jesus at the Last Supper." He does this a number of times when wanting to identify his presence

at events in the scriptures; he doesn't use his name but describes himself in other ways. There is a measure of humility in John doing this. He described himself not just in humble ways, but in ways that portrayed this magnificent, overwhelming reality that he was an intimate and beloved companion of Jesus. Every opportunity that John had to make reference to himself, he instead takes an opportunity to celebrate his intimacy with Christ.

Finally, when we don't see John's name in his writings, we are not surprised because we don't see the names of the other gospel writers either. None of the gospels identify their authors. It appears that it was not until the gospels were put together as a set and sent out to the churches that each gospel was given a title to identify the author.

JOHN'S FIGHT AGAINST HERESY

Both John's gospel and epistles combat a **heresy** that later became known as Gnosticism (*näs-tə-si-zəm*). The seeds of Gnosticism were present during the time of Paul and John and eventually developed into a full-blown heresy a century or so later. Let me take a moment to define Gnosticism.

Gnosticism may have had a significant role in the writing of the First Epistle of John as well as had some influence in John's gospel account. Gnosticism was a heresy in its infant stages during the years when the New Testament was written, and a number of books in the New Testament spend some time refuting Gnosticism or the teachings that led to Gnosticism in later years. An overview of Gnosticism can be helpful in understanding not only John and his epistles but other books in the New Testament as well.

- “Gnosticism” comes from the Greek word “to know.”
- The teachings of the Gnostics had a number of variations, but all had several major features in common:

First, Gnosticism taught that salvation was found through a higher, spiritual knowledge. Those who entered into this knowledge were considered “enlightened ones.” Ordinary people, including **Christians**, did not have this knowledge. They had to seek it through mystical ways and higher planes of spiritualism. This is similar to the extremes of some to obtain special spiritual gifting’s today. For both Gnostics and those today claiming God has given them special spiritual gifts shifts the focus away from Christ and onto the person. When this shift of focus happens it is always a sign of false belief or heresy.

Second, the spirit and flesh were thought of as separate entities. Spirit was good, but flesh was bad. The spirit was untouched by fleshly influences, no matter what the flesh did. Therefore, the flesh could sin, at will, if one so desired, and the spirit was unaffected. A Gnostic could live a very immoral lifestyle and still claim to be a spiritual person. We can observe this in the lifestyle of some people today.

Gnosticism was rooted in ancient Greek philosophy of Plato and others. When the church spread from Jerusalem to Greece, it inevitably encountered this philosophy.

Finally, Gnostics did not see how a good God could have created an evil physical world, so they concocted a worldview that absolved God of any responsibility for evil committed by people of our world by separating the spiritual world from the physical world. Today “Open Theism” teaches God has no responsible for the condition of the world.

Gnosticism is addressed in both the gospel of John and in his epistles. This argues for common authorship confronting a common problem at a common time.

From the 80s to the mid-90s A.D. John was in charge of the churches of Asia Minor or modern Turkey. John was probably an overseer of the church at Ephesus which had been founded by Paul. The church at Ephesus and other Asia Minor churches, known as the seven churches of Asia Minor, is to whom letters are written in the first section of Revelation. Although he was an old man at the time, we can assume he was still a fiery proclaimer of truth, he was still a preacher and a teacher and a pastor and a shepherd. It was for his preaching and teaching that he was taken prisoner and he was condemned to die in exile on an island out in the Mediterranean called Patmos. It was on Patmos around the year 96 A.D. in exile that he was given the vision of **Revelation** to encourage a very discouraged Apostle. We know he had reason to be discouraged, he was persecuted; he was put out of circulation and was exiled to the island of Patmos. But even more compelling in his discouragement was that the churches over which he had leadership, now during his exile were beginning to turn away from the truth. This is manifest in the seven letters to the churches in which two letters have a positive message to a church that is doing well, and five letters have a negative message to compromising sin-riddled churches.

So God gave John the Revelation to encourage him that there was a glorious future, even if the present time was tragic. Jerusalem had been destroyed in 70 A.D. The land of Israel had been massacred, 985 Jewish towns and villages had felt the slaughtering power of Rome. At this time things didn't look good for God's promises to Israel, things didn't look good for Christ's promises to the church, the church was

in disarray and even after John's best efforts, the seeds of compromise and sin had found their way into the church and here he was in exile, out of commission and separated from the churches he so loved.

All of this writing then is crammed into a few years at the end of the first century. This last man standing, this last Apostle alive has a great burden to bear as he unfolds the truth of God as the Apostle to wrap up the writings of the New Testament. Now near the end of his life comes a flurry of divine writings to guide the church then and now. John's focus was to bring people and churches back to the truth of God found in Christ. All those years that the other writers of the New Testament are penning God's instructions to the Church of Christ we don't hear much from John. Finally after all these years John explodes with revelation from God. As Papias who had said of John, "He was a living and abiding voice for God's truth." John was the last contributor to divine revelation of God called the Bible. He was the last to add to the record that God wanted written to the Scriptures.

JOHN'S FOCUS

Before we begin studying 1 John in two weeks, God willing, let me talk about what John's overall focus and purpose of his epistles or letters. This is really the sermon following the background information I have given this morning. John wants his readers to understand that there are two major realities in the spiritual realm, two inseparable, essential, irreplaceable realities that are most critical to all effective ministries. Those two realities are truth and love. The Apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesian church, "Speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held

together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it **builds itself up in love**. (Ephesians 4:15-16)

We see then Paul had the same understanding as John. The Apostle Peter wrote, "Having purified your souls by your obedience to the **truth** for a sincere brotherly **love**, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God." (1 Peter 1:22-23) In John's 2nd epistle he wrote, "Grace, mercy, and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, **in truth and love**." (2 John 3) These Apostles knew that at the end of the day truth and **love** are the two most compelling realities in all ministries.

The priority is the truth proclaimed in love. That is the balance, sound doctrine and the gracious love of the Spirit. It is not enough to have the love and the gentleness and the graciousness and leave out the truth. You have to have the truth. The ignorant and the deceived need the truth. It's not enough to love them, to leave them in error, leave them in shallowness and to teach half-truths to please men. It's not enough to come to people clothed in tolerant half-truths that are a poor substitute for genuine love. There must be the truth. It's not good when love is missing and the truth is just cold facts that are stifling and unattractive. Ministry must possess truth and love for that is the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. Christ was the perfect image of truth and love in balance. If you're seeking to minister to someone, these are the two things you must seek first to know the truth as God has revealed it and seek to love as Christ loves.

The perfect example of truth administered in love, of course, is Jesus Christ. But John is also a marvelous example of this. He may be the best New Testament model

to look at, although it is hard not to see Paul as at least John's equal. If you understand truth and love united together, you understand John. John was not always humble. Remember early in his life, Jesus called him a "son of thunder." He didn't manifest humility in the beginning of his calling by Jesus; he manifested a bold, self-promoting ambition. He and his brother James, asked their mother to go to Jesus and ask if they could sit on the right and left hand of Jesus in the Kingdom. At this early stage of ministry he was arrogant. He had a volatile personality. Jesus changed John, the Holy Spirit grew him in maturity – this is the process of sanctification that all believers travel in life.

John is the Apostle of love. In fact, his theology of love appears throughout his writings. John writes in his gospel that God is a God of love, that God loved His Son, that God loves the world, that Christ loves God, that Christ loved His disciples, Christ expects believers to love Him, Christ taught that we should love one another and that love is the fulfillment of the whole Law. Until the end of his life as the last Apostle to die at the end of the first century, John never tolerated deception, he never tolerated lies, he was always committed to the truth, he never tolerated sin and he loved Christ and those Christ **entrusted** to his care with a deep love. These are the very same goals for any pastor as he shepherds.

I think that the most powerful advocate of truth, the most direct Apostle was also the most powerful representation of love. Isn't it interesting that the most clear-cut, authoritative and absolute writer of the New Testament is known in history as the Apostle of **love**? Not a love that takes you down the road of tolerance, but a love that takes you down the road of truth, for telling the truth is the most loving thing anyone could ever do. John was a lover of the truth more than anything and he

loved the truth and the God of the truth and the Christ who is truth incarnate so much that he would tell people lovingly the absolute truth. We are going to learn the truth in no uncertain terms from a man who is committed to it, but also a man with a heart of love.

Let me close in Prayer - Father, as we have just started this morning, we can already feel the anticipation mounting and building as we sit at the feet of this beloved, blessed, old man who picked up his quill and under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and wrote to believers to teach them truths that would give them full joy and holiness and assurance. Here we are, as have many generations, sitting at the feet of that old man who was as far as humanly possible the best illustration of truth and love in balance and we eagerly await his instruction, as well as the power of the Spirit of God to implement this truth in our lives. Grant to us the joy and the holiness and the security that these epistles of John are intended to bring, we say thank You in our Savior's name. Amen.