

THE LETTERS OF JOHN

The Apostle John wrote letters, as well as his Gospel and the Book of Revelation. Three of these have been preserved in the Bible. They belong to a period late in the First Century, because there is already evidence in them of the same infiltration of evil men predicted by Paul and Peter. From the opening chapter of Revelation we learn that John had a special responsibility for a group of seven mainly Gentile (non-Jewish) Christian congregations in the Roman province of **Asia** (the west side of Turkey). So he seems to have spent his last days away from the land of Israel. The style of the letters, particularly the first, mirrors that of his Gospel – abstract, thoughtful and logical.

John's First Letter

It is difficult to follow the argument in the five chapters of the first epistle. It should be remembered that the original letter would have had no chapter divisions, indeed, no punctuation whatever, and we depend heavily on our translators to guide us through the subtleties of the Greek text. The overall theme is clear - that believers must love each other, if they want God to forgive their sins. But John also hits out at those who had begun to question the father-son relationship between Jesus and God.

The opening verses correspond to the beginning of John's gospel – the thrilling concept that God's **word**, his will to bring a new kind of life to this world, revealed verbally in the Old Testament, had now been shown to men in physical form, embodied in his Son. Live with Jesus as we once did, says John, and you will come to see what God is truly like, just as any son resembles his father.

This statement, dear reader, elevates Jesus of Nazareth above anyone else who has ever lived. The claims of other religious leaders fall stone dead when we contemplate the life of the Son of God. There can be no

comparison. Jesus is not just another prophet. As John will write in the fifth chapter, "*God gave us eternal life, and that life is in his Son. Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life*" (1 John 5:11,12).

Darkness and light do not mix. If we live a life of sin, he says, we cannot come close to God, who dwells in light. Of course, none of us except Jesus is truly sinless. But our lapses, humbly confessed, can be forgiven for Jesus' sake. The real test of our claim to love God in heaven is twofold – first, that we are prepared to show compassion to our brothers here on earth, and second, that we keep ourselves separate from the evil world around us.

John remembers that Jesus had warned that 'antichrists' (opponents of Jesus) would arise. They have already come, he says, denying that Jesus was the promised Messiah (Christ). And to prove they were not genuine, he adds, they have begun to leave the church and return to the world, because they are uncomfortable in the presence of the truth. The Holy Spirit, like the anointing oil that consecrated kings and priests, has revealed that truth to the community of the believers. We must hold it fast.

Again he returns to the vital role of love in the life of a Christian. If we hate each other, as Cain hated his brother Abel, we are effectively murderers, even though we strike no blow. Love is self-sacrificing, and emerges in practical giving, and forgiving, and even intercession for the forgiveness of another sinner. Love starts off from God – he loved us first, and sent his Son to bring us to himself. Now we must show that love to others. Nobody can see God. But looking at us, as we ourselves once looked at Jesus and loved him, people should see a little of the character of God. What a challenge John leaves his readers, in whatever age they live!

John's Second Letter

The second letter is very brief. It is addressed to 'the elect (chosen by God) lady'. Whether this is a Christian sister, or John's code word for a congregation of believers, we cannot be sure. He commends her children for their faithful walk, and reminds her of the need to love each other (his life-long theme). But he has a sharp warning. The antichrists are on the way, he says, men who deny that Jesus was a man like us, subject to temptation and death. Their teaching would undermine the sacrifice of Jesus, emptying of meaning his victory over sin. Anyone who comes to you with these wrong ideas must not be welcomed. Do not even allow him into your house.

These strong words indicate two important things: first, what we believe is important, and second, the truth the apostles taught cannot be modified. To confuse or change the role of Jesus as both Son of God and Son of Man is to risk losing our reward.

John's Third Letter

This time the recipient of John's letter has a name – **Gaius**. It was a common one in the First Century, so we cannot identify him

with certainty with others of that name mentioned in Romans and Acts. John had just been visited by travelling Christian brothers who told him about the situation in Gaius' congregation. All was not well. These brothers had tried to visit the church Gaius attended, but had been shut out by a man called **Diotrephes**, a self-appointed leader of the congregation. He did not even admit the authority of John, one of the 12 apostles! But faithful Brother Gaius had received the visitors and made them welcome. And Brother **Demetrius**, too, could be relied on. Soon, John tells Gaius, he would be on the warpath. He was going to make a personal visit and put Diotrephes in his place.

This letter shows once again how soon after the time of Jesus bad influences were creeping into the Church. It is a warning to us that an easy going attitude will soon allow the gospel to become diluted and corrupt, endangering its power to save us from death.

We shall hear from John a little later, but first there is another one-chapter letter to consider – the Epistle of Jude.