

Letters of John

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Plan for This Morning

- God is Love
- Background
- Themes
- Questions for Table Discussion
- Feedback

God is Love



God who breathes through all creation:
God is Love, eternal Love.

God is Love

- ▶ Only twice does the Bible come right out and say this: 1 John 4:8 & 16
- ▶ Love is the motive for everything that God says and does, the harsh words as well as the kind ones, the acts of judgment and punishment and the acts of salvation and mercy
- ▶ “God is love” is at the heart of the three letters attributed to John

Who and When?

- ▶ Early Church attributed these works – neatly labelled in English Bibles as 1, 2, 3 John – to the apostle John, a disciple of Jesus
 - ▶ Based on language, style of outlook as similar to the fourth Gospel, which was attributed to John
- ▶ John the Elder?
- ▶ Ordering 1,2,3? → Longest to shortest
- ▶ Around 90s CE

A Little More Background

1 JOHN

- ▶ A treatise / sermon more than a “letter.” Offers general advice and encouragement for the benefit of those who have remained in the community. They need to pull together now as never before, upholding one another in love.

2 JOHN

- ▶ Addressed to a local church at some distance from the main community, warning the congregation that missionaries from schismatic groups might try to influence them.

3 JOHN

- ▶ A letter of recommendation for a missionary from the elder’s own community, Demetrius. Gaius is to show hospitality even though Diotrephes, from a neighboring church, is trying to prohibit anyone from doing this.

The Humanity of Christ

- The Johannine Letters emphasize the reality and significance of Jesus' humanity.
- "In the beginning" (cf. John 1:1)
 - Refers to the life and ministry of Jesus, who was an actual person, a man who could be seen and heard (1 Jn 1:1-3)
- "Jesus has come in the flesh" (1 John 4)
 - In the fourth Gospel Jesus couldn't been divine because he was human --- here, some are arguing Jesus couldn't be human because he was divine
- Fully divine and fully human
 - Jesus' identification with God is so close in 1 John that it's challenging to tell whether the pronouns refer to God or Jesus
 - The developed understanding of "two natures of Christ" is compatible with these Letters

Atonement

- ▶ The author of the letter emphasizes the significance of Jesus' death for salvation
 - ▶ (1 John 2:2; 3:16; 4:10)
- ▶ In 1 John, Jesus' death is referred to as *hilasmos* --- translated as, "atoning sacrifice" in NRSV
- ▶ Of course... the meaning of the word is disputed:
 - ▶ Propitiation = placating an offended God
 - ▶ Expiation = cleansing or removal

This facilitator wishes atonement wasn't a word that scared us so much – but, that's a conversation for another day

Sin

- ▶ In 1 John we see a tension between the reality of sin and a desire for sinlessness
- ▶ 1 John maintains that people who sin do not know God and are from the devil (3:8) BUT...
- ▶ Then the letter seems to recognize sin as typical of the Christian experience (1:9; 2:1; 5:16).
- ▶ Most likely a rhetorical point: goal = sin-free but reality is otherwise so confess!
- ▶ 1 John also refers to “mortal sin” or “sin that leads to death.”
 - ▶ Theories abound: spiritual death? Idolatry? Denying Christ? Willful and persistent sinning?

Love

- ▶ 1 John summarizes the expectation and demands of God: *We should believe in the name of the Son Jesus Christ and love one another.*
- ▶ The exhortation to “love one another” is repeated 7 times with certain themes:
 - ▶ People love one another when they keep God’s commandments
 - ▶ ... when they imitate God
 - ▶ ... when they live like Jesus
 - ▶ ... lay down their lives for others
 - ▶ ... use material resources to provide for others in need
- ▶ Loving “brothers and sisters” not neighbors or enemies?
 - ▶ Strengthening bonds within the community during time of stress, conflict and schism

Conflict and Schism

- Written during a time of conflict and schism in the network of house churches

- CLAIM TO:
 - Be without sin (1 John 1)
 - Know God by disobey (1 John 1)
 - Love God but no neighbors (1 John 2)

- DENY:
 - Jesus is the Christ (1 Jn 2)
 - Jesus has come in the flesh (2 Jn 7)
 - The Father and the Son (1 Jn 2)

- DO NOT:
 - Confess Jesus as Christ (1 Jn 2)
 - Abide in the teaching of Jesus (2 Jn 9)

TABLE DISCUSSIONS

- TABLE ONE: GOD AS LIGHT (1 John 1:5-3:10)
 - What are the key points?
 - How does it speak to us today?

- TABLE TWO: LOVE FOR ONE ANOTHER (1 Jn 3:11-5:12)
 - Same as above!

- TABLE THREE: THE CHOSEN LADY in 2 JOHN
 - Who do you think “she” is? “Her children?”
 - What’s “her” message?

- TABLE FOUR: 3 JOHN
 - Who are the key players?
 - What’s going on?
 - What’s the message for us today?