

Exploring
the Letters
of John
& Jude

A DEVOTIONAL COMMENTARY



GEORGE R. KNIGHT



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Dedicated to

Bruce Johnston,
whose love and ministry reflect
that of the apostle John

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Exploring the “Exploring” Idea

*E*xploring the Letters of John and Jude is the fifth volume in a series of user-friendly commentaries aimed at helping people understand the Bible better. While the books have the needs and abilities of laypeople in mind, they will also prove beneficial to pastors and other church leaders. Beyond individual readers, the “Exploring” format will be helpful for church study groups and in enriching participation in midweek meetings.

Each volume is best thought of as a devotional commentary. While the treatment of each passage seeks to develop its exegetical meaning, it does not stop there but moves on to practical application in the daily life of believers in the twenty-first century.

Rather than focusing on the details of each verse, the “Exploring” volumes seek to give readers an understanding of the themes and patterns of each biblical book as a whole and how each passage fits into its context. As a result, they do not attempt to solve all of the problems or answer all the questions related to a given portion of Scripture.

In an effort to be user-friendly these devotional commentaries on the Old and New Testaments present the entire text of each biblical book treated. The volumes divide the text into “bite-sized” portions that are included immediately before the comments on the passage. Thus readers do not have to flip back and forth between their Bibles and the commentary.

The commentary sections aim at being long enough to significantly treat a topic, but short enough for individual, family, or group readings.

The translation of each New Testament book is my own, and claims no special merit. Although I have based it on the original languages, in

making it I have conferred with several English versions. While not being a “technical achievement,” the translation has sought to take every significant translational problem and issue into consideration and to remain as close as possible to the original text of the Bible. In order to accomplish that goal the translation employs word-for-word translation wherever possible but utilizes thought-for-thought translation when word-for-word fails adequately to carry God’s message from the original languages and cultures into modern English.

George R. Knight
Rogue River, Oregon

Foreword

The letters of John and Jude have all registered in my thinking over the years, but the impression varied from letter to letter. First John has always been one of my favorite Bible books. Its engaging style, the warmth of its message, its promise of forgiveness, and its significant discussions of sin and the atonement have all found a large place in my heart and thinking.

I can't say the same thing for John's two shorter epistles. To me they generally registered a zero. I knew that they belonged to the 27 books of the New Testament canon, but they never really stimulated my interest.

And then there was Jude. With his little letter my attitude was neither positive nor neutral, but rather one of negativity and avoidance. His reports of angels "reserved in everlasting chains under darkness," the esoterics of the apocryphal sayings of Enoch, and beastly people behaving like waterless clouds and twice-dead trees just didn't do much for my daily walk with Jesus.

Given my attitude, I tended to neglect Jude and 2 and 3 John, while spending a great deal of time studying and preaching from 1 John. The last two years have witnessed a reevaluation. As one might expect, I continue to hold onto John's first letter as one of my favorites. But, surprise of surprises, once I embedded myself in Jude I came to see both his logic and the crucial importance of his message for the twenty-first century. Beyond that, I found that the two shorter letters of John took on life when read in the context of the larger one and in relationship to each other.

What struck me most about the combined study of these documents was how much the church in our day needs their counsel. Both authors

wrote to congregations flooded with strange philosophic ideas that undercut not only apostolic authority and teaching but Christian theology and morality in every age. The four letters taken together have a message second to none for a church living in a secularizing society inundated by post-modern attitudes, Eastern and New Age religious concepts, and moral laxity.

Having spent two years with these little books, I am absolutely certain of their importance for twenty-first century Christians. And that is especially true of Jude. He thundered his judgments for a reason. And that reason in the end was redemptive. Because he cared, he could not be silent. But all of his thundering is contexted in an understanding of God's saving gospel second to no other New Testament author.

One can read this devotional commentary as a freestanding book or it can be utilized with the on-line study guide developed to accompany it. The study guide to *Exploring the Letters of John and Jude* will provide those who use it with an opportunity to let the biblical books speak to them personally through a number of structured questions before they turn to the commentary itself. (To download and print the free study guide, go to www.AdventistBookCenter.com, find the book *Exploring the Letters of John and Jude*, then click on Click for Details and follow the instructions for downloading the study guide.)

I would like to express my appreciation to my wife, who typed my handwritten manuscript; and Gerald Wheeler and Jeannette R. Johnson, who shepherded the manuscript through the publication process.

I trust that *Exploring the Letters of John and Jude* will be a blessing to its readers as they seek to learn more of their Lord and as they put that knowledge into practice in daily living.

Exploring
First John

Introduction to the First Letter of John

How plain, how full, and how deep a compendium of Christianity!” (Wesley, vol. 3, p. 146). John Wesley’s description of 1 John speaks to all of us who love that little book.

Our Bibles tell us that 1 John is a letter. But it doesn’t look like one. After all, it has no address, addressee, or reference to a specific author. Beyond that, it contains no names of either persons or places, and it indicates no special destination. “In fact,” G. M. Burge tells us, “of all twenty-one letters” in the New Testament, 1 John “is the least like a first-century letter” (in Martin, p. 596). Another notable feature of 1 John is that it never quotes from the Old Testament. From that perspective, it is worlds apart from the letters authored by Paul, Peter, and James.

But for all its peculiarities John’s first letter is brimming to the full with some of Christianity’s most edifying and informing teachings. It is one of the most rewarding books to read in all of Scripture. Before turning to the letter itself, it will be helpful to examine a few background issues.

Author, Date, and Recipients

Even though the three letters assigned to John do not bear his name, both the records of the early church and very definite thematic connections with the Fourth Gospel firmly suggest that their author is the “beloved” apostle John, the son of Zebedee and one of Christ’s original 12 disciples.

While John began his ministry in Jerusalem, he spent his latter years in the Greek world. Not only would he be exiled to the island of Patmos off

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of the coast of Asia Minor (today's Turkey), but he would lead the church in nearby Ephesus for many years.

That location is significant, since Ephesus in the latter New Testament period was a fertile breeding ground for the Greek philosophic ideas that would eventually cause the difficulties in the Christian church in that area of the Roman Empire that would call forth John's three letters. And it is significant that the first letter in the book of Revelation (also authored by John) was to Ephesus. Although invaded by false apostles, the church had overcome the teachings of the Nicolaitans (Rev. 2:1-7; cf. verses 14, 15), who had apparently been teaching some form of lawless indulgence on the basis that "the human body was evil . . . and only the spirit was good. A Christian, therefore, could do whatever he desired with his body because it had no importance" (Tenney, vol. 4, pp. 435, 436; see also Irenaeus *Against Heresies* 3. 11. 1). That anti-law teaching would be targeted in 1 John.

The apostle John most likely wrote his three epistles to the church in the Ephesus area sometime between A.D. 80 and A.D. 90. By that time the Greco-Roman philosophic ideas that would later be known as Gnosticism, Docetism, and Nicolaitanism would have had time to germinate and develop. As we will see, forms of all three of those related and problematic concepts would be central in the false teachings that John would combat in his epistles.

Occasion and Background

All students of 1 John agree that its author composed it to address a situation brought about by a schism in the Christian community. The dissidents were Christians who had formerly belonged to the church, but who had recently "went out" from the fellowship to start a movement of their own (1 John 2:19, RSV). But even though they had left the church, they were still communicating with its members "and were causing considerable uncertainty among them regarding the true character of Christian belief and whether the members of the church could truly regard themselves as Christians" (Marshall, p. 14).

A series of warnings found throughout the document reveals the nature of the opposition:

- "If we say that we have fellowship with Him yet are walking in the darkness" (1:6).

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- “If we say that we have no sin” (1:8).
- “The one saying ‘I have come to know Him, yet is not keeping His commandments’” (2:4).
- “The one claiming to live in Him” but doesn’t walk like Him (2:6).
- “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ?” (2:22).
- “If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother” (4:20).

At the core of the schism stood teachings related to the nature of Christ. For example, the schismatics denied that Jesus was the Christ (2:22) and that He had come in the flesh (4:2). On the other side of these issues are 1 John’s repeated affirmations that Jesus was the Son of God and the Christ who had come in the flesh (1:3, 7; 2:23; 3:8, 23; 4:2, 9, 10, 15; 5:1, 11).

It appears that the dissidents had no problem accepting the idea of a divine Christ or Messiah but doubted that such a divine being became flesh and, more specifically, that the man Jesus was the incarnation of God. Thus as G. B. Caird puts it, “We are not to conclude . . . that they were Jews or Judaizers who denied [Christ’s] Messiahship, but that they were Christians who denied the Incarnation” (in Buttrick, vol. 2, p. 947). Their teaching represents the idea, later called Docetism (from the Greek *dokein*, which means “seemed”), that Christ didn’t really come in the flesh but only appeared to do so. That perspective reflected a Greek philosophic position holding the idea that spirit was good, while the material aspects of existence (including the flesh) were evil. Thus the teaching that the divine Christ would appear in flesh was both foolish and impossible.

Closely related to the separatists’ Christological problem was its ethical outcome. Having separated their understanding of the divine Christ from the human Jesus, they found it only natural to deny the significance of Jesus’ earthly teachings. Thus they boasted that they were free from sin (1:8, 10), that they had fellowship with God even as they walked in darkness (1:6), that they knew God even though they were disobedient (2:4), that they were in the light in spite of the fact that they hated their fellow Christians (2:9), and that they loved God even as they hated their earthly brothers and sisters (4:20).

Undergirding the theories of the separatists were prominent Greek philosophic concepts centering on the ideas that matter was evil and that the way to God was through special knowledge available to only an elite

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minority. A few decades after the writing of 1 John such ideas would become fully developed in the teaching that came to be known as Gnosticism.

The word “Gnosticism” derives from *gnōsis*, the Greek word meaning knowledge. In the Christian community of 1 John the separatists, with their superior airs and claims to special knowledge, had apparently shaken the confidence of many of those still faithful to the church. Their’s, the implication ran, was the true prophetic voice that had superseded the primitive and unsophisticated ideas of the *old* apostle who was leading their church. As a result, those still faithful to the teachings of the church had come to doubt not only their understanding of Christianity but their personal spirituality.

Purpose of 1 John

The aim of John in his first epistle was obviously to meet the challenges of those troubling the church. But neither that epistle nor the other two can accurately be called polemical writings since they do not speak directly to those who have caused the trouble. Rather, we should view them as pastoral letters to those who have remained faithful.

As Colin Kruse points out, “the author’s purpose . . . was not to correct the secessionists . . . , but to show his readers that the secessionist claims were false. By doing this he wanted to prevent them from being deceived by secessionist teachings” (Kruse, p. 27).

In the process, one of John’s central aims was to attack the authority of the false teachers troubling the church. Thus the significance of his command to test the spirits. “Beloved,” he wrote, “do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, of which you heard that it was coming, and now it is in the world already” (4:1-3, RSV).

The apostle not only unmasked the false prophets, but went on to note that faithful believers had nothing to fear since they “are of God” (verse 4). They were not only of God but they had been “anointed by the Holy One” (2:20, RSV), and they had “no need that any one should teach”

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them since they “abide in him” (verse 27, RSV). In short, the faithful members had nothing to fear from the dissidents. Not only did the latter have a false spirit, but the faithful had both the Holy Spirit and God’s truth.

John set forth at least three tests by which to expose the false teachers (see Law, pp. 21-24).

- The test of truth—that those who are from God hold that Christ came in the flesh (4:1-6).
- The test of righteousness—that those who are from God confess their sins (1:9), walk in the light (2:6), and keep God’s commandments (2:4).
- The test of love—that those who are from God love their fellow church members (2:10, 11; 3:14; 4:20).

After applying those tests to both the dissidents and themselves, John’s readers will know that they are the ones who know God, have fellowship with Him, and have eternal life. The apostle’s “tests” not only expose the secessionists but at the same time confirm the faith and status of his faithful parishioners. Thus his presentation agrees with the letter’s one explicit statement of purpose: “I write this to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life” (5:13, RSV).

1 John’s Major Themes

First John is rich in its teachings. While it does not present a systematic view of theology or Christian living, its responses to the secessionists highlight several themes that stand at the heart of a sound Christian understanding and ethics.

1. *Apostolic Authority*. The first words in 1 John raise the issue of authority. John buttresses his teachings with an assertion that his is a first-person witness. He *knows* because he has *heard*, *seen*, and *touched*. And those things that he has experienced he is passing on to his readers (1:1-4). Throughout his letter John repeatedly claims that the foundation for belief is the apostolic witness “which you heard from the beginning” (3:11; 1:1; 2:7, 13, 14, 24). Gary Burge points out that he “is not merely writing in defense of tradition, as if ‘older is better’ or any innovation is suspect.” Rather John “is pointing elsewhere. By ‘the beginning’ he refers to the historic coming of Jesus Christ and the preservation of that revelation” through the authoritative apostolic witness (Burge, p. 35). Thus he asserts

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that believers must test the new “prophetic” and philosophic ideas of the dissidents he is combating against that historical witness (4:1-6). Foundational to his message is John’s belief that “the church is accountable to the historic revelation given in Jesus Christ and passed down through the apostles” (Martin, p. 593).

2. *The nature of Christ.* Because the central attack of the dissidents dealt with the person of Christ, 1 John in its answer to them is especially helpful in what it teaches about Jesus the Christ. Robert Kysar is on target when he writes that “no other NT writing stresses the importance of the humanity of Jesus for Christian faith” as do 1 and 2 John (in Freedman, vol. 3, p. 909). Because the false teachers had uplifted Christ’s divinity at the expense of His humanity, even going so far as to distinguish between the divine Christ and the human Jesus, John asserts that “Jesus is the Christ” (5:1), that He came in the flesh (4:2), and that He is the Son of God (1:3, 7; 2:23; 3:8, 23; 4:9, 10, 14, 15). A correct understanding of the nature of Christ became for the apostle the litmus test of Christianity. Those who were wrong on that point should not be trusted (4:1-3).

3. *The saving work of Christ.* It is logical that those who denigrated the humanity of Christ would also fail to realize the significance of His life and death. Thus John sets forth Jesus as the propitiation or “atoning sacrifice for our sins” and “also for the sins of the whole world” (2:2, NIV; cf. 4:10). The fact that Jesus died in our place as “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!” (John 1:29, RSV) was the foundation of John’s understanding of the plan of salvation. Because of His death for humanity, those who accept Him become children of God (1 John 5:1), are born into God’s family (3:1, 2; cf. John 1:12, 13), and receive the gift of eternal life (5:13). More specifically, the death of Christ provides the grounds for the forgiveness of sin (1:9). It is “the blood of Jesus His Son” that “cleanses us from all sin” (1:7). The sacrificial death also forms the foundation for His advocacy before the Father on behalf of sinners (2:1). As a result, John sets forth Jesus as the “Savior of the world” (4:14), an expression found only here and in John 4:42.

4. *The nature of sin.* Another highlight of 1 John is its description of sin. Sin is a big item in the apostle’s agenda. He uses the noun form for sin (*hamartia*) 17 times and its verbal equivalent (*hamartanō*) 10 times. The letter defines sin as “lawlessness” (3:4). Central to its discussion is the seem-

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ing contradiction between the statement that Christians “cannot sin” (3:9, RSV) and the assertion that Christians who say that they do not sin are liars (1:8) and make God into a liar (1:10). As we will see in the commentary, the inability to sin of chapter 3 reflects on sin as a self-centered, anti-God way of life, while the first chapter is speaking to lapses in behavior which can be confessed and thus forgiven (1:9). John therefore pictures confessed sins as “not unto death” but sin as a way of life as “unto death” (5:16, 17, KJV) since it is not repented of or confessed.

5. *The moral life.* Closely related to John’s definition of sin as “lawlessness” (3:4) or “the transgression of the law” (KJV) is the issue of living the Christian life. William Barclay points out that “no New Testament writer makes a stronger ethical demand than John does, and no New Testament writer more strongly condemns a so-called religion which fails to issue in ethical action. God is righteous and every one who knows God must reflect in his life the righteousness of God (2:29)” (Barclay, p. 20). If the false teachers he is combating walk in darkness (1:6) and are disobedient (2:4), the true followers of Christ must walk as He did (2:6) and keep His commandments (2:3). After all, “he who says ‘I know him’ but disobeys his commands is a liar, and the truth is not in him” (2:4, RSV). At the very center of the obedient life in 1 John is the duty to love (4:8).

6. *The centrality of love.* Augustine (354–430) was only slightly exaggerating when he wrote in the preface to his commentary that 1 John “speaks at length and almost the whole time about love” (in R. Brown, p. 116). Words related to *agapē* (love) occur 62 times in John’s brief letters. Leon Morris makes a profound point when he writes that “we will never find what love means if we start from the human end” (Morris, *Theology*, p. 290). John begins with the divine perspective. Not only does he define God as love (4:8) but he specifically relates God’s love to humans in the cross of Christ: “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (4:10, NIV; cf. 3:16).

Human love from John’s perspective is a response to divine love. Only because we see and experience His love toward us in sending Christ do we love in turn. His love for us inspires us to love Him and other people (2:10; 3:23; 4:7, 21; 5:2). Keeping His commandments is one expression of our reciprocating love to God. “For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments” (5:3, RSV). Morris notes that “it is striking that these let-

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ters, which put such stress on love, have more references to God's commandments than any other New Testament book (*entolē*, 'command,' occurs 18 times, whereas Paul has the word only 14 times in all his epistles)" (Morris, *Theology*, p. 290). John's teaching on the topic is an expansion of Christ's which highlighted love to God and other people as the very center of the law (Matt. 22:36-40). As does the Fourth Gospel (John 13:35), John's first epistle makes love the defining characteristic of true Christianity (3:14; 4:20), while showing hate to others is the mark of those who walk in darkness (2:9).

It is no accident that John put such an emphasis on love, given the divisive and unloving ways of the false teachers who were disrupting the church or churches that he was writing to. Unity and fellowship could be achieved only through God-inspired love.

7. *The assurance of God's children.* One dominating theme in 1 John is the Christian's assurance of salvation and eternal life (see Boice, p. 9). We see that theme reflected in the author's only explicit statement of purpose: "*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God so that you may know that you have eternal life*" (5:13, NIV). Such assurance is also at the heart of the Fourth Gospel, which asserts that "he who hears my word and believes him who sent me, has eternal life" (John 5:24, RSV; cf. John 3:36).

The key word for 1 John's doctrine of assurance is "know." Thus true believers may have confidence because they

- "know" that they are in Him because they keep His commandments (2:3, 5).
- "know" that they have passed from death to life because they love fellow believers (3:14).
- "know" that they abide in Him because He has given them His Spirit (4:13).
- "know" that they are the children of God because they love and obey Him (5:2).
- "know" that they are born of God because they do not live in a state of sin (5:18).

Please note that assurance for John is not "merely believe and be saved," but is related to how people live their lives. While belief is important, as James Montgomery Boice puts it, John "works on a more practi-