

INTRODUCTION TO THE NEW TESTAMENT LETTERS OF JOHN

A close-up photograph of a book cover. The words "NEW" and "TESTAMENT" are printed in a large, bold, serif font. The "NEW" is on the top line and "TESTAMENT" is on the bottom line. The background is a light, textured surface, possibly the book's cover or endpaper.

After Christmas and until Lent, we are planning a sermon series on the 3 New Testament Letters of John (although 1John is not really a letter at all!). If these are not familiar to you, here is a very short introduction...

What do you think of when you hear the phrase “the early church”? We read the descriptions of Christian communities that formed soon after Jesus’ ascension in the Book of Acts and pick up hints about it from other New Testament letters and perhaps this forms for us a picture of a single congregation – or a number of small congregations -- all of whom believed much the same things about Jesus and who worshipped in much the same way.

Not so! There were some major differences of belief held by the first Jewish Christian believers and so different early Christian communities came into being.

One group, (that quickly subdivided into smaller groups, as differences of belief about Jesus emerged), was known as the Johannine community. This group of early Jewish Christians based their beliefs on the teaching of Jesus revealed in John's gospel. 1, 2 and 3 John come from this community.

Scholarship largely agrees that these were written c AD 100 (100CE) very soon after the gospel according to John came into existence, c AD 90. There is less agreement on authorship (no surprises there!) but the scales tip in favour of one author for 1John and a different writer for both the letters that we call 2 and 3 John.

1 John (with no hallmarks of a letter, this is more an exhortation) has many themes in common with John's gospel and running through it all is the affirmation of fundamental truths about Jesus that will guide true believers in their discipleship, the warning against false teaching and the need to love one another within the true community of faith. False teaching and deviations from the basic truths about Jesus were real problems. Have a look at the opening chapter of 1 John and see how the author pulls no punches in stating who Jesus is !

2 and 3 John are letters! Each was written by someone of standing in the community, to other Johannine groups. ("The lady and her children" are almost certainly a way of referring to a local church and its members. Think house church rather than St Thomas!).

2 John is very short (13 verses) and prohibits association between members of the church and a separatist group of Johannine Christians. ...And it ends with a sentiment we can really identify with at the moment " ...I hope to come to you and talk to you face to face..."

3 John is again very short (15 verses!). The author writes to someone called Gaius, commending him for his past hospitality in welcoming travelling missionaries and in the hope of securing further funding for ongoing missionary work. Another character – Diotrephes ('who likes to put himself first', v9) – has refused a similar request ...

