

# 1: INTRODUCTION

## Relevance

1. These outlines are, in a sense, the last part of a trilogy. It started with a Bible-study on Christ's Farewell Discourse as we find it in the gospel according to John.<sup>1</sup> Since the *new commandment*, issued by Christ in that discourse, plays a significant role throughout the New Testament epistles, this was followed by another Bible-study.<sup>2</sup> The epistles of the apostle John demonstrate especially how this *new commandment* was applied to the situation of his day. This led me to write these outlines.
2. Their preparation was also the result of what I would like to call a personal re-discovery. In the course of my ministry I have delivered a number of sermons on these epistles, but it was only during the above-mentioned studies that I learned to see more clearly the rich meaning they have for today. This is why these outlines not only present an exegetical view of their contents, but also a serious effort to show the significance of John's epistles for the situation in which we are living today. I am convinced that we can benefit from what the apostle wrote so long ago.

## Name, author, addressees

1. The three letters which we will study with the help of these outlines, are known respectively as the first, the second, and the third epistle of John, or as I John, II John, and III John. The author doesn't identify himself. In II and III John he uses a pseudonym, *The Elder*. This may have been done for security reasons.

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1. See my *The Relevance of Christ's Farewell Discourse. A Bible-Study on John 13:31-16:33*, No. 14 in the New Series of *The Reformed Guardian*, Kelmscott 2002.

2. See my *Christ's "New Commandment" and its implications*, to be published in the same series.

In I John a self-introduction is missing, as are the names of the addressee and the greetings which are usually passed on at the end of a letter. Yet we consider I John to be an epistle.

The addressees of II John are called *the elect lady and her children*. This too must have been a matter of security.

Although in III John a certain Gaius is mentioned as its addressee, we have no further particulars of this brother.

Because the apostle John, at his old age, has been reported as having worked in the Western part of Asia Minor, we may safely presume that the letters were sent to congregations located in that region. Details about their church life are known from the epistles themselves.

2. We have no doubt that the apostle John is indeed the man who wrote these epistles. We base this on the various resemblances between the gospel according to John and these letters.

[Even in the gospel, John does not clearly introduce himself as the author. However, now is not the time to deal with this 'problem'.

We refer those who want to read something about it to William Hendriksen's *A Commentary on the Gospel of John* (The Banner of Truth Trust, London 1954), pages 18-21.]

## The Johannine writings

1. We have derived the title of these outlines from one of these resemblances.

In I John 1:4 he states:

*And these things we write to you that your joy may be full.*

In II John:12 we read:

*but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.*

He expresses the same, but with different words, in III John:4, where he writes:

*I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.*

All this reminds us of the gospel according to John, where we find the same statement, *that your joy may be full*, made several times by the Lord Jesus (John 15:11; 16:24).

He, too, formulated the same somewhat differently in His prayer, recorded in chapter 17, when He said:

*But now I come to You, and these things I speak in the world, that they may have My joy fulfilled in themselves (verse 13).*

Here the joy of Christ's disciples is characterised as His own joy.

Earlier John the Baptist had used the same phrase when he was told that many people, instead of coming to him, went to Jesus of Nazareth. He then compared himself with a bridegroom's friend who is happy when he hears the bridegroom receiving his bride:

*Therefore this joy of mine is fulfilled (John 3:29).*

Taking together all these Scripture references from John's gospel and his letters together, we must conclude that the author of the latter is also the man who wrote the former.

Furthermore, was the apostle John not first a disciple of the Baptist, and then of the Lord Jesus? (John 1:35ff).

[At the same time we learn how to read these epistles: joy plays a dominant role in them, and we hope to see why this is so.]

2. There are more points of resemblance between the gospel and the epistles.

This is the case in the so-called 'prologue' of the gospel and the sentences with which the first epistle is opened. This becomes perfectly clear when these texts are printed side by side.

**John 1: 1-4**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.

In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

**I John 1: 1-2a , 5**

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life - ... the life was manifest, ... This is the message which we have heard from Him, and declare to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

The underlined words clearly show the resemblance.

3. There is still more. It is quite remarkable that what we usually call the first conclusion of John's gospel (John 20:31) is, as it were, repeated in I John 5:13. To demonstrate this, we

again show both passages in parallel.

**John 20 : 31**

These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in His name, believe in the name of the Son

**I John 5: 13**

These things I have written you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to of God.

I John is clearly linked to the conclusion of John's gospel.

4. Therewith we have already touched on what is basic in each of these writings of the apostle John.

This is also the aim he had in mind: that he and his readers would have joy in believing that Jesus is the Christ, joy because the Son of God has come down from heaven. His Incarnation is a very important event in the history of salvation.

We have already read about the Incarnation in the gospel and I John. As for the confession *Jesus is the Christ*, the gospel tells us that John the Baptist publicly declared this (John 1:19, 34; together with 3:28), that Nathanael confessed Him as such (1:50), as did the Samaritan woman (4:29), and other people (7:31, 41; 9:22). Also Mary of Bethany (11:27), and Christ Himself declared it publicly (17:3). In John's first epistle this confession is again crucial when it says (2:22):

*Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ?*

We find the same positive statement in I John 5:13 where it says:

*These things I have written to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, that you may know that you have eternal life, and that you may continue to believe in the name of the Son of God.*

There is also this (5:20):

*and we are in Him Who is true, in His Son Jesus Christ.*

## **Purpose**

1. John expresses the purpose of his letters in a few sentences where the pronoun *that* plays a dominant role.

Because we read something similar in John's gospel, again there is proof that the writer of the epistles is also the author of the gospel.

At the same time he applies what he wrote in his gospel, 20:21, to the situation in the congregation to which he sends his letters.

We have already quoted John 20:21 (read it again under 5). Read also I John 5:13. In both of these Scripture places the apostle makes it clear that, by urging his readers to persevere in their faith that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, he wants to assure them that in Him they have eternal life.

However, there are more places in which he makes clear his aim in writing these letters.

In I John 1:3 he says:

*That you may have fellowship with us; and truly, our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.*

His aim is not only for them to have fellowship with the apostle, but also with God the Father and His Son.

He then adds (I John 1:4):

*And these things we write to you, that your joy may be full.*

Then there is I John 2:1, where we read:

*My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous.*

The reason why John made this application of his original aim will become clear when we deal with that section in one of the outlines that follow.

We have just read I John 5:13 (see under 6), where it says that the apostle had the readers' perseverance of faith in mind.

And the title of this booklet comes on the scene again when we refer to II John verse 12:

*I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full.*

2. The theme of fellowship plays an important role in John's epistles. We have already read about this under 7. It also comes to the fore when John speaks not only of *your* joy, but also of *our* joy, which includes himself.

This has some significant implications, because the believers are supposed to form a close community, bound together by *brotherly love*. This brotherly love is given great emphasis when it is shown in John's epistles to be based on the *new*

*commandment* issued by the Lord Jesus in His Farewell Discourse of John 13:34 (and 15:12). He says there:

*A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another.*

In his first epistle John refers to this *new commandment* when he writes (4:21, see also 2:8):

*And this commandment we have from Him: that he who loves God must love his brother also.*

The same can be found in II John:5, where it says:

*And now I plead with you, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment to you, but that which we have had from the beginning: that we love one another.*

In III John we find the opposite when disobedience to this commandment of Christ is emphasised. A brief picture is drawn of the situation in the congregation concerned where a certain Diotrephes has caused disunity (verses 9 and 10).

3. All these points prove that the apostle supposed the readers of his epistles to be familiar with his gospel. This confirms the conclusion that the gospel was written at an earlier stage, and there existed some danger that the life of the congregations addressed by John in his epistles was not always in harmony with what the gospel had taught them.

These epistles can therefore be considered as efforts to stimulate the people concerned to persevere in the faith in Him Whose work of redemption was so clearly explained in the gospel. Certain aspects of it (for example, that of the Incarnation of the Son of God), are therefore repeated in the epistles. The readers are urged to do what Christ had commanded them to do: to stand firm in this faith as a close community. They must be joined together by brotherly love, based on a common love for their Saviour.

4. By faithfully studying these epistles we must expect to be blessed by experiencing the same joy, in fellowship with many other believers together with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

### **For contemplation or discussion**

1. The phrase *in the beginning* has two different meanings in the Johannine writings. In John 1:1, as well as in I John 1:1 and 2:13,14 it refers to the time when the heavens and the

earth were created; in John 8:44 and I 3:8 to the earliest history; whereas in John 15:27, 16:4, and I 2:7, 2:24, 3:11, and II:5,6 these words point to the very beginning of the believers' discipleship.

On the Internet I found an article where this difference is used to support the idea that John's first epistle was a "Puzzle" (*The Puzzle of I John* is the title of another article to which reference was made): there was not a *single logical thread* in it. My question is: Can this difference of meaning of the phrase *in the beginning* be accepted without drawing such a conclusion?

2. Some commentators are so deeply impressed by the close resemblance between John's gospel and his epistles, that they have drawn the conclusion that his first epistle must have served as a letter that accompanied his gospel when it was sent to the congregation or congregations concerned.

After what we have learned so far I conclude that you will be able to prove that this cannot be true.

### **Points of advice**

For a useful discussion it is necessary to be well prepared. This includes looking up all the Scripture references mentioned in these outlines where they have not been quoted. It is also wise to have a good commentary at hand. However, the very first step that should always be taken, is to read the chapter or section under discussion. The very best thing is to read the whole Bible-book in question first of all.