

# The Family and Our Brother John

By George Davis

Tradition holds that all but one of the apostles died a martyr's death. Of this one exception, Jesus said to Peter, "If I desire him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You follow Me" (John 21:22). Because of this it was rumored that John would live until the Lord came again. Well, we know that didn't happen, but for a time it appeared that he might, because John did outlive the rest of the apostles by about thirty years. He is thought to be "the old man at Ephesus" referenced in the Christian literature of the 2nd century, who died of old age during the reign of Trajan (98 AD).

John's epistles were written about twenty-three years after the beheading of Paul and the crucifixion of Peter (67/68 AD) and afford us a glimpse of what the Church looked like toward the end of the first century. With the passage of time the Lord developed a matured expression of His light, life and love. In this late first century Christian community John lived in, we see an advanced example of Christ's intention for His Church.



## Setting the Stage

By 90 AD, when John's first epistle was written, many of the churches throughout Asia Minor were beginning to depart from the faith. They were experiencing the early stages of what some historians call "the rise of the Bishops." Paul earlier warned against wolves who would rise up to lead away disciples after themselves (See Acts 20:30). Things were progressing rather quickly. Christ's assessment of the condition of the churches only five years later in chapters 1 through 3 of Revelation shows the churches in varying stages of apostasy. The very worst of these was the Laodicean church. They were replacing the headship of Christ with the headship of man. How do we know this? Jesus is depicted standing outside their door, knocking, asking to be let back in and to resume fellowship with them once again. Apparently these churches had stopped listening to the Spirit, for seven times Jesus said to them, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches." Early church history is a record of the decline of the Christ-

centered, Spirit-led family of God and the simultaneous emergence of a man-centered, man-led ecclesiastical institution. In those dark days, our brother John contended for the preservation of the Christ-centered, Spirit-led family of God.

## **Between The Lines**

In obedience to the Lord (Matthew 23:8-12), John never called himself by ecclesiastical titles or postured over the assembly he gathered with. Instead, he made a habit of introducing himself with such titles as brother and companion (see Revelation 1:9). He opens his first epistle without mentioning himself at all and throughout not a single proper name is mentioned except the Lord's. This is very telling! A person will inevitably relate to everything and everyone around him according to how he perceives himself and others. If he thinks too highly of himself, his speech will be condescending and his actions dominating. If he thinks he is beneath others his speech will reflect that as well. Between the lines of John's first epistle, he reveals his view of the Church and his perceived relationship to them. Without doubt, his perspectives were radically different from those of the so-called "apostles" of our day. How so?

From a purely scholastic point of view, you may discover the nature of any piece of literature by the number of times particular words are used in the text. You can also determine much by the words that are not used. A simple word count reveals volumes. Words emphasize goals and priorities. Then there is the matter of style to consider. A technical manual reads much differently than a letter to a family member.

John was clearly not writing from the diocese-paradigm of the apostate churches in the fourth and fifth centuries. He was not issuing edicts but writing loving letters to his spiritual brothers and sisters. In view of that, his words take on relational warmth uncommon in Christendom today. He wrote as a brother and companion, not as an ecclesiarch. Allow me to demonstrate.

The following ecclesiastical titles cannot be found in John's first epistle.

- Apostle
- Prophet
- Evangelist
- Pastor
- Teacher

- Ministry
- Minister
- Leader
- Bishop
- Deacon
- Elder

Now let us consider the use of family nouns and the number of times they are used.

Father	12 times - Referring to God as the paternal head of the family
Fathers	1 time - Referring to mature family members.
Brother	12 times - Referring to all Christians as siblings
Brethren	4 times - Referring to all Christians as siblings
Son	21 times - Referring to Jesus
Sons	2 times - Referring to all Christians
Children	12 times- Referring to all Christians

In this little letter that contains no ecclesiastical titles, we find 64 family nouns. This ought to tell us something. We know by the style and diction of this letter that the church John wrote to was not a regimented institution, subjugated and maintained by intimidation, but was a family, constrained and led by the Spirit of love. John was writing to his siblings and companions, not his underlings. Now let's further consider this Spirit-led family and John's relatedness to them.

### **"You have an anointing"**

I have already mentioned that the word teacher does not appear in this letter. The words teach and teaches each appear only once, in chapter 2, verse 29, applying to the Holy Spirit.

These things I have written to you concerning those who try to deceive you. But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will abide in Him. (NKJV)

Men were trying to deceive the assembly. John gives us clues to the chief characteristic of that deception. In short, it was the notion that someone, anyone, other than the Holy Spirit, was needed in an ongoing sense, to teach the family. John's words, "You need not that any man teach you," have a very deep and profound meaning, and that is, "You need not that any man teach you." He was writing in response to the Gnostics who were trying to seduce believers into accepting their elitist teachings, their gnosis or secret knowledge that only they knew and therefore only they could teach. But any man means any man. John was careful to preface his remarks with these words. "[But you have an anointing from the Holy One, and you know all things. I have not written to you because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and that no lie is of the truth](#)" (verse 20, NKJV).

John is very careful to inspire dependence on the true Teacher, and that Teacher is not John but the One of whom Jesus said, "He will guide you into all truth." John reminded the family of what the Holy Spirit had already taught them. "as it (the Holy Spirit) has taught you." John was also reminding them that "the same anointing teaches [present tense] you all things." Not a few things, but *all* things! John was very cautious not to supplant the Holy Spirit as Teacher, and shows an incredible faith in and deference to the Holy Spirit to lead and guide the entire family.

It is my earnest prayer that the heavenly Father will surround you with such a family, and that He will nurture to maturity brothers and companions like John, who will not seek the preeminence but point others to the true Teacher and Guide.