



# John

That the World Will Know We Are One

BY JEFF REED

**A 6-SESSION STUDY FOR DIALOGUE IN  
COMMUNITY AROUND THE SCRIPTURES**



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# THE INTENTION OF JOHN'S GOSPEL ①

As we approach John's Gospel, we again find before us the formidable task of identifying the author's intention for writing. At first this task seems easier in John's Gospel because in chapter 20:30–31 he gives us his intention for writing his Gospel. Then in the very next chapter, 21:24–25, he builds on that statement. But we must remember that the Gospels always have a context, and situating them in that context is key to understanding what the author was really attempting to accomplish with his work. In this case, John has a body of writing: 1, 2, and 3 John, his Gospel, and the Book of Revelation. This body of writings has a very carefully constructed argument that moves through the entire collection.

Therefore, the task of discerning John's intention in writing his Gospel has just become more difficult. Since it is part of a larger context and part of a theological argument and challenge that moves across his corpus of writings, we need to understand that bigger argument and to whom it was written. In other words, we need to situate his Gospel within his body of writing. Then, after doing that, we need to return to his intention statement in John 20:30–31 and place that statement in context. Ultimately, we have to ask is John writing for the same reason as the other Gospel writers? Is he writing to a network of churches and using his Gospel to stabilize those churches in the gospel, he and the other Apostles received? To this task we must now enter.



## Study the Scriptures

READ THE PASSAGE: JOHN 20:30–31; 21:24–25;  
JOHN 13–17; 2 AND 3 JOHN, REVELATION 2 AND 3

### Think Through the Questions:

1. What do you learn in John 20:30–31 about John's intention in writing? Who was the audience he seemed to primarily have in mind?

2. What does his second intention statement, 21:24–25 add to the first? Why do you think he had two statements?
3. How does situating John's Gospel in his writings shape his intention?
4. What do you think was John's main concern for his network of churches?

### **Summarize the Core Teaching of the Passage.**

Write a paragraph below that summarizes John's intention in writing his Gospel and how he accomplished that intention in the way he shaped the story. Show how situating John's Gospel in the flow of his other writings, helps shape his intention.

Record your summary below.



## **Consult the Scholars**

The following comments are designed to help you better understand the passage and to stimulate your thinking on the implications of the teaching.

### **Read and Reflect on this Brief Commentary on the Intention of John.**

This study is the last in a series of studies on the Gospels. We began with *From Jesus to the Gospels*, followed by Mark, Matthew, and then Luke–Acts. In light of the argument in *From Jesus to the Gospels* that the Gospels were actually written to networks of churches to stabilize them in the gospel as the Apostles were ending their ministries, we must ask the

question again: Was John also writing to a network of churches, attempting to keep them firm in the gospel they had received? Or was he writing for a fundamentally different reason than the other Gospel authors? Raymond Brown surfaces this issue in his work on John's writings.<sup>1</sup> Brown concludes the following:

- The word *church* (ecclesia) never occurs in the Gospel of John or in 1 or 2 John.
- The term *kingdom of God* is noticeably absent from the Gospel of John.
- The concept of *the people of God* seems to be absent as is the term *Apostle*, in its proper sense.<sup>2</sup>

A little later he asks the question,

“Was this community an accepted church among churches, or an alienated and exclusive conventicle?”<sup>3</sup>

So was John writing in the tradition of the other Gospels? Was his Gospel a complete treatment of the kerygma, as were the others? Did he follow the Greco–Roman biography genre (bios), intended to stabilize his churches in the gospel?

Before situating John's Gospel in the context and argument of his writings, we will begin by simply commenting on the body of research to clearly establish John in the same Greco–Roman genre.<sup>4</sup> John took the statement of the kerygma—the core of the gospel (cf. 1 Corinthians 15:1–6)—and expanded it to show what Jesus did, from His beginnings to His resurrection, and how that formed the gospel message received from the Apostles and delivered to the churches. The kerygmatic, Greco–Roman shape of John, as outlined by Burridge, is as follows:<sup>5</sup>

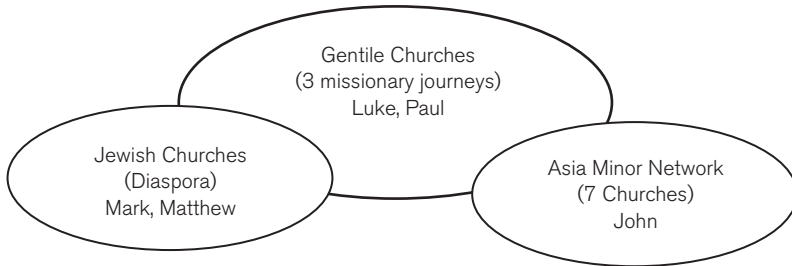
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| Content analysis of John's Gospel |                                  |                           |
|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| <i>Chapters</i>                   | <i>Topic</i>                     | <i>Percentage of Work</i> |
| 1:1–18                            | Prologue                         | 2.0                       |
| 1:19–51                           | Beginnings and call of disciples | 3.8                       |
| 2–10                              | Ministry and Signs               | 48.6                      |
| 11–12:11                          | Bethany                          | 7.8                       |
| 12:12–50                          | Entry into Jerusalem             | 4.5                       |
| 13                                | Last Supper                      | 4.3                       |
| 14–17                             | Discourses                       | 13.3                      |
| 18–21                             | Passion and Resurrection         | 15.7                      |

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Now let's turn our attention to John's writings as a whole. The Johannine corpus consists of five writings: one gospel—John; three epistles—1, 2 and 3 John; and the Book of Revelation. In *The Gospels: Solidifying the New Kerygmatic Communities*, book one in this series, we established that the Gospels were written to networks of churches.<sup>6</sup>

## Regional Networks in the Last Third of the 1<sup>st</sup> Century



This can easily be seen by turning to the last of John's works, the Book of Revelation. Chapters two and three address the seven churches of John's network. Here is the essence of the seven church evaluations:

1. All the churches are evaluated on whether they have kept the word (the teaching, the commandments, the truth):
  - Ephesus: tested teaching
  - Smyrna: simple faith commitment
  - Pergamum: held to false teachings
  - Thyatira: tolerated false teaching systems
  - Sardis: ignored the teaching
  - Philadelphia: kept my word
  - Laodicea: half-way committed to it
2. They are evaluated on their practice in following the teaching:
  - Ephesus: hold the truth, lost the love
  - Smyrna: poor, but hold on
  - Pergamum: tolerate unsound systems
  - Thyatira: tolerate a powerful unsound teacher
  - Sardis: ignore the teaching, yet good deeds
  - Philadelphia: kept my word
  - Laodicea: lukewarm commitment

This is consistent with John's concerns that he wrote about in his three letters. We can see the following from his three letters: they were written to key individuals in churches to help keep the churches in the true faith; the test of true faith was embracing the kerygma and walking in the teaching; the author wrote from an eyewitness position and a position of authority; and the context of the letters assumes a network of churches existed. This is absolutely consistent with the concerns John was to deliver to his churches in

Revelation 2:1–3:17. The essence of John’s message in 1 John is this:

Test the false apostles and teachers.

Stay in the truth.

Love one another.

This is also consistent with his admonitions to his small network of churches in 2 and 3 John and with the evaluation of his churches in Revelation, many who were not adhering to this message.

Now let’s turn to the Gospel of John. There are two major parts to the Gospel of John, which cover all the content between the entrance and exit of Jesus. In the second major part, John 13–17, Jesus begins by laying down a New Covenant for the new community of disciples He is forming. They are to be marked by love for one another (John 13: 34–35). He is about to leave, and this new community, the Church, is about to be set up. He tells them to stay in the truth (as the argument unfolds in John 13–17) and be marked by love for one another. This argument is consistent all the way through John’s entire body of writing. His concern is for his churches.

Let’s look at John’s statement of why he wrote his Gospel. In fact, let’s take into consideration both the first and follow-up statements.

John’s statements of intent:

<sup>30</sup>Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book. <sup>31</sup>But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name. John 20:30–31

<sup>24</sup>This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. <sup>25</sup>But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written. John 21:24–25

He wrote his Gospel that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah (the gospel, the kerygma) and that believing you might have life in His name. Most likely John’s Gospel was written between the letters and the Book of Revelation. John wants the churches to embrace the gospel fully and completely, to test and avoid false teachers, and to love one another (keeping his commandments, the didache). The argument is consistent all the way across his writings.

So what was John doing? He was trying to keep the churches on the right course: keeping them in the truth (the commandment, teaching they had received), rooting them in the certainty that Jesus was sent from God and in the foundational element of that teaching—love for one another. So, holding everything in our minds that we have established so far—both



the context of John's statement of intent (for his writings) and the statement itself—let's attempt to summarize John's intent in writing his Gospel.

John's intention:

To provide a full treatment of the kerygma for his network of churches, in terminology best suited for the Greco–Roman arguments undermining the gospel, that they might remain in the gospel and fully enter into the life now available to them, that the one new Church promised by Jesus might mature into the worldwide witness that would bring glory to God.

This brings us back to the very beginning and the thesis set forth in the first book in this series, *From Jesus to the Gospels: Stabilizing the New Kerygmatic Communities in the Gospel*. We have already seen that Mark, Matthew, and Luke–Acts were intended to stabilize the new churches in the gospel at a time the Apostles were being removed from the scene. Now we see the last Apostle, John, writing the last materials of the New Testament. And he has the same concern: stabilizing the churches in the gospel.

## Read and Reflect on Key Quotes.

The following references are from three different sources that reinforce the idea that the gospel was primarily written to churches and to believers within those churches to keep them solid in the gospel and to fully experience the oneness and shared life Christ intended for his churches.

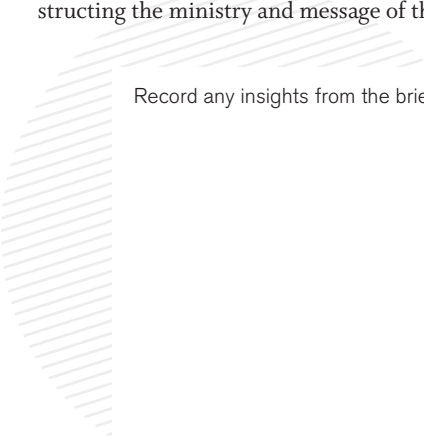
“It is clear, to begin with, that the gospel has behind it the common Christianity of the early period, and that the readers who shared the life and thought of the Church would find here much that was familiar, from which they could advance its new and unfamiliar teaching. The evangelist presupposes the existence of the Church itself with its ‘Koinonia,’ under the leadership of ‘the Twelve.’ He presupposes the two primitive sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist. He presupposes the ‘kerygma’ in which the primitive Church made known its faith to the non-Christian public.

“The kerygma is essentially a proclamation of the facts about Jesus in an eschatological setting which indicates the significance of the facts. It is prefaced, or accompanied, by the announcement that the prophecies are fulfilled in these facts, which must consequently be regarded as inaugurating a new age, and a new order of relations between God and man; and is attested by an appeal to the experience of the Spirit in the Church. The literary form that came to be known as ‘the good news’ is based upon the ‘kerygma,’ and the Fourth Gospel, no less than the others. The main topics recur, and in the same order, as they are found in Mark and in the primitive forms of kerygma in Acts: the preaching of John the Baptist, the inauguration of the Messiah, His ministry in Galilee, His removal from Galilee to Jerusalem, His suffering, death and resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>7</sup>

“Were ‘you’ those who already believed or those who were to come to belief? Does ‘that you may have faith’ in John 20:31 mean ‘that you may continue to have faith’ or ‘that you may get faith’? The textual evidence and scholars are divided on which form of the Greek verb to read: the present subjunctive (‘keep believing’) or the aorist subjunctive (possibly: ‘make an act of faith’). Can both views be true?

“Certainly the Gospel was written in good part to deepen the faith of believers so that what they had gained by way of God’s life more than made up for what they had lost in their former religious adhesion. The evangelist speaks to those who had accepted Jesus, thereby becoming God’s children, begotten not by human intervention, but by God (1:12–13), in order to make them appreciate the life they had been given. Some of the decisive theological emphases in the Gospel are directed to crises within the believing community, rather than the conversion of nonbelievers.... As for bringing people to faith, there is not much evidence that the Gospel was a missionary document in the ordinary sense of offering a text to be read to or by nonbelievers.”<sup>8</sup>

“Primarily, the Gospels tell us how an evangelist conceived of and presented Jesus to a Christian community in the last half of the first century, a presentation that indirectly gives us insight into that community’s life at the time when the Gospel was written. Secondly, through source analysis, the Gospels reveal something about the pre-Gospel history of the evangelist’s Christological views; indirectly, they also reveal something about the community’s history earlier in the century, especially if the sources the evangelist used had already been part of the community’s heritage. Thirdly, the Gospels offer limited means for reconstructing the ministry and message of the historical Jesus.”<sup>9</sup>



Record any insights from the brief commentary and quotes.



# Think Through the Issues

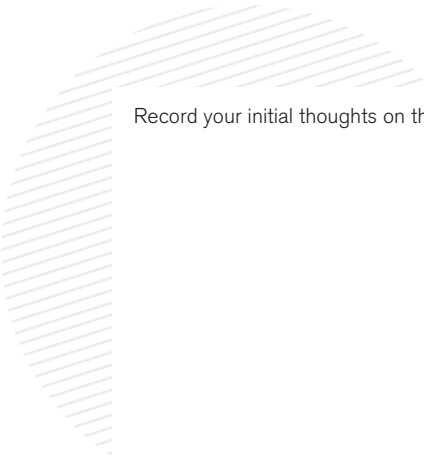
In this section, we will reflect on the value of John's Gospel to our churches and lives today. We now know that John was writing to churches to protect them from false teachers who would deny Jesus is the Christ and lead them away from the gospel and from remaining in the truth and loving one another. It is clear from the fact that five of the seven churches in Revelation had either left the gospel and the commandments of Christ's new community, His church, or had mixed it up with other teaching. It was evidently very difficult to keep the early churches on the right course: remaining in the gospel and keeping the teaching that was delivered to the churches, the foundation of which was loving one another.

With this very clear understanding, we need to evaluate ourselves. Are we stable in the gospel and the New Covenant and its teaching that our churches are to live by? We will reflect on how to use John's Gospel in our churches today. We cannot expect to have abundant life in His name if we are not rooted in the true gospel. Our churches cannot expect to be fruitful or even last, for that matter, if we tolerate false teachers or leave the true gospel. Our belief must be solid. This section is to help us begin to explore the significance of the Gospel of John in keeping our lives and our churches solid and on course. We must produce the kind of love and unity demanded for our churches to become the witness that is more powerful than the witness of the original signs performed by Jesus, leading to initial faith. This Gospel, in the context of John's writings, is a very powerful tool.

**ISSUE:** The value of John's eyewitness-based account

## Think Through the Issue Before Discussion:

1. What is the value of John's eyewitness-based account as the last authoritative account of the Jesus story? What was its value to John's community of churches?
2. What is its on-going value to churches everywhere?
3. How do we use the Gospel of John today, in ways it was not intended? How is it misused in the Church at large?
4. How can we take full advantage of its value to us as churches today? within our movement of churches? in our individual lives?



Record your initial thoughts on the issue before discussion.

### **Discuss the Issue in Your Small Group.**

Record your initial thoughts on the issue after discussion.



# Apply the Principles

It is now time to respond to what you have studied and discussed. Take your time on this section.

## **Think Back Through the First Three Steps.**

### **Design an Application for Your Life.**

Think through John's intention in writing his Gospel and in including a second intention for writing (as studied in this session), and reflect on the Gospel's value. How can it be used more fully in your life and ministry? What do you need to do to ensure you are using it correctly?

Evaluate your own understanding and how you value the Gospel of John. How can you get to the point of using it effectively in your life and ministry?