

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD: JOHN'S LETTERS

2010 Spiritual Growth Study

Written by Justo L. and Catherine Gunsalus González, this study offers an in-depth study of John's Letters. It seeks to answer key questions such as "Who wrote the Letters?," "To whom were they written originally?," and "What do these Letters mean today to us?" Further the study explores the common references such as the polarity between life and death, light and darkness, truth and falsehood in John's Letters and the Fourth Gospel. The study also examines the resemblance of images and phrases that appear in John's Letters and the Fourth Gospel, including the view that salvation consists in "having life," God being "light," Christian life as "walking in light," and many others.

1 John, rather than a *letter* in the strict sense, was a resource intended to be read to gathered congregations as they prepared to celebrate the Lord's Supper. The partakers are being told that they are partners with God. This partnership or *koinonia* also meant communion—the celebration of the Lord's Supper that was the high point of Christian worship. Communion was named *koinonia* because through it, Christians became partners in the body of Christ, and also because the early communion services were occasions of sharing in which all brought what they could, and in that particular moment, as in a foretaste of the Reign of God, none would be hungry.

John Wesley found the simplicity of 1 John quite valuable, and he deplored the manner in which many preachers in his time confused complexity with profundity, and form with substance. Wesley said, "If any man speak," in the name of God, "let him speak as the oracles of God;" and if he would imitate any part of these above the rest, let it be the First Epistle of St. John. This is the style, the most excellent style, for every good preacher. And let him aim at no more ornament than he finds in that sentence, which is the sum of the whole gospel, "We love Him, because He first loved us."

In 1 John, the emphasis lies on love of God and of one another—a love that expresses the hope of believers for what is to come. Different age groups in the community of faith—and, by implication, other groups on the basis of gender, culture, etc.—are all part of the same community, and the commandment of love applies to all of them—particularly across group lines. 1 John draws the readers to the close bonding between Christ and his church. The followers of Jesus who are joined to Christ in baptism are anointed as he was anointed—they were made *christs*, anointed ones, by virtue of the *Christ*, the anointed One. In ancient baptismal services, the newly baptized were anointed with oil on the forehead as a sign that they were part of the holy, priestly people of God. If this was already the practice in John's time, what he was telling his readers sounds familiar in today's context: "Remember your baptism." They will not be led astray by the *antichrist* because they have received the *chrisma* of *Christ*. The authors explore how 2 John talks about truth and love, and 3 John about unity in love. Together, 2 John and 3 John show the complexity and difficulties inherent in the unavoidable task of "discerning the spirits." Keeping both truth and love—or even better, knowing that truth without love is false, and that love without truth is not love—is the constant calling to which we, the readers of the Letters, must return today.

The study guide by Mary Kathryn Pearce offers a variety of methods of facilitating the study, examples of love in action and models of *beloved community*. Examples are from the writings and impact of persons such as Martin Luther King, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Letty M. Russell, Wesley Ariarajah, Wahu Kaara, and others.