

**The Catholic Epistles**  
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**Introduction**

The Catholic Epistles: There are twenty-one letters contained in the New Testament; seven are known as the "catholic epistles":

The letter of St. James

The 1st and 2d letters of St. Peter

The 1st, 2d, and 3d letters of St. John

The letter of St. Jude

Background information:

Originally grouped together (probably during the 2d century AD) primarily because of their non-Pauline authorship.

Became known as the "catholic epistles" during the 3d and 4th centuries.

The term "catholic" (Greek, *katholikos* = "universal") was apparently used to suggest that these letters were "universal" or "general" – i.e., intended for the Church at large and not for particular churches or individuals.

However, the appellation "catholic" does not fit the 2d and 3d letters of St. John: 2 John was directed to an unnamed local church (probably in Asia Minor), and 3 John is a personal letter from the author to "Gaius." These two epistles were no doubt included in the "catholic" collection because of their Johannine origin.

The catholic epistles were written during the last three or four decades of the 1st century AD

Central themes:

Problems stemming from the dispersion of the Church throughout the world during the period between the ascension and the second coming of Christ.

The relationship between the Church and "the world" – always a source of difficulty for the followers of Christ. It is not easy to be in and yet not of the world.

The Christian's ambivalent attitude toward the world:

On the one hand, the world is God's world, created by God and loved by God, currently alienated from God, it is true, but destined to be redeemed and reconciled to God. On the other hand, the world is dominated by a spirit [the devil] totally opposed to God, organized in such a way as to exclude God, drawn towards unworthy goals of material status and self-interest, quite different from the goals towards which the Christian way leads.... The Christian is sent into the godless world to reclaim it for its rightful Lord, but while it remains the "godless world" it is an uncongenial environment for the Christian: he cannot feel at home there...[because his] true homeland [is] elsewhere. (F.F. Bruce)

In this sense, the Church is a "stranger and exile on the earth" (Heb 11:13), and Christians, while they are in the world, must live as "aliens and exiles" (1 Pt 2:11).

### Worldliness and/or persecution:

Christians (like all human beings) are tempted by the "passions of the flesh" (1 Pt 2:11), and are attracted to the ways of the fallen world. The devil is continually seeking to entice us into worldliness, into sin, into a life of self-centered gratification.

If we refuse to follow the path of worldliness, the devil works to turn the world against us, and the Church must then face persecution.

The catholic epistles warn their readers of the spiritual dangers of "worldly temptation" and of the likelihood of persecution when worldliness is effectively resisted.

Christians are to work in the world for the salvation of mankind, but they must beware of the infection of worldly corruption, and they must be always ready and willing to suffer on behalf of the gospel of Christ. They must not allow the world – either through temptation or through persecution – to subvert and defeat the divinely ordained purposes of the Church.

### Worldliness and heresy:

One aspect of the problem of worldliness that was particularly disturbing to the authors of the New Testament was the rise of heresy within the Christian community itself.

Heresy – the entertaining, acceptance, and propagation of doctrines that are inconsistent with the apostolic tradition – is a sign of the "worldly invasion" of the Church.

During the 1st century, there were three heretical movements within the Church of grave concern to the apostles and their disciples:

#### Jewish-Christian legalism (taught by the "Judaizers"):

Salvation depends on strict adherence and conformity to every jot and tittle of the Mosaic code. Salvation is achieved through "works of the law."

Much of the preaching and writing of St. Paul was directed against the heresy of the Judaizers.

#### Jewish-Christian "intellectualism":

Salvation is a product of true belief alone; no need to worry about "good works." Orthodoxy of belief is all that matters; the practical conduct of life is of no salvific importance.

The letter of St. James was written mainly in order to counteract this intellectualist heresy.

#### Christian Gnosticism:

Like apostolic Christianity, Gnosticism was opposed to worldliness. However, unlike apostolic Christianity, Gnosticism was based upon the belief that the created order was originally and inherently evil, created by the devil rather than by God and utterly contrary to the life of the spirit.

The Gnostics taught a radical spirit-matter dualism in which matter was the principle of evil, and they accordingly denied (1) that Christ had "become flesh" and (2) that God intended to redeem the entire material universe.

An interesting aspect of Gnostic teaching was the view that because matter has nothing to do with spirit, sexual licentiousness and other forms of physical sin, if engaged in with the proper "mental attitude," could actually contribute to man's liberation from the material world.

The letters of St. Peter, St. John, and St. Jude were all aimed at refuting the doctrinal and moral errors of Gnosticism.

The overall teaching of the catholic epistles on the problem of worldliness:

The catholic epistles uphold the apostolic tradition of Christian theory and practice – the need for "godliness" and the necessity of avoiding "worldliness." Godliness defined in terms of both knowledge of the truth (faith) and moral righteousness (good works).

**The Letter of James**

Date of composition, audience, and authorship:

Written ca. 60 AD by "James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ," to Jewish Christian communities "in the Dispersion" (that is, throughout the world – 1:1).

According to tradition, the author of this letter was St. James of Jerusalem, "James the Just," a "brother" (i.e., relative) of the Lord and first bishop of the church in Jerusalem.

Nature and content:

A "parenthesis" – i.e., and exhortation and teaching of wisdom in a popular style.

Contains the author's views concerning true religion, true wisdom, and true Christian living; directed primarily against the heretical teachings of the Jewish Christian intellectualists mentioned above.

Summary:

True faith and true religion:

Christianity is the one true faith. However, an authentic faith in Christ expresses itself in an active and practical moral life: "Be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (1:22), for "faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead" (2:17).

An authentic Christian faith must be active and must "complete itself" in righteous moral works (2:22). Just as "the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (2:26).

Examples that illustrate how moral works can express and complete the Christian's faith:

"Religion that is pure and undefiled before God and the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world" (1:27). The Christian is to avoid worldliness and to be concerned actively with the affliction of others.

According to "the royal law" of love, the Church is to "show no partiality" to the rich at the expense of the poor. If anything, the poor are to be preferred over the rich, for the rich are most often oppressors and exploiters! (2:1-13, 5:1-6)

True religion and the need for self-control:

It is not easy to attain self-control, for man has a tendency to be "lured and enticed by his own desire," and human desire (or lust) "gives birth to sin, and sin...brings forth death" (1:14-15). This tendency toward lust, sin, and death must be (and therefore can be) resisted, no matter how difficult such resistance may be.

The difficulties of attaining self-control - examples:

The problem of controlling the tongue (see 3:1-12).

The evil of slander (4:11-12).

False confidence with reference to one's status in this world and the next (4:13-17)

The temptations of wealth (5:1-6).

The need for patience concerning the second coming of Christ (5:7-11).

The need to avoid the making of sworn oaths (5:12).

#### True wisdom:

The wisdom of the world versus the wisdom of God:

Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good life let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. This wisdom is not such as comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. . . . But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, without uncertainty or in-sincerity. (3:13-18)

Like much of the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, James depicts wisdom as a practical understanding of the will of God, an understanding which enables believers to live at peace with the Lord and with their fellow human being.

#### Wisdom and the connection of faith and works:

To be truly wise is to seek friendship with God (on the basis of faith and obedience) rather than "friendship with the world."

Worldliness, especially in the form of immoral conduct ("bad works"), leads one into demonic bondage (the bondage of sin and death) and makes one "an enemy of God" (4:1-10).

"Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the Devil and he will flee from you. Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands, you sinners, and purify your hearts, you men of double mind" (4:7-8).

A life guided by "the wisdom from above" is a life in Christ, a life in which one's faith in the Lord is enacted in those works that make for righteousness.

## **The First Letter of Peter**

#### Date of composition, audience, and authorship:

Written from Rome c. 60-68 AD to certain Christian communities in Asia Minor composed mainly of converts from paganism (1:1-2).

The letter was dictated by the apostle Peter to his amanuensis, Silvanus (or Silas).

#### Overall message:

Peter exhorts those who have been "chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit for obedience to Jesus Christ and for sprinkling with his blood" (1:2) to maintain their hope in Christ, to practice holiness within the life of the Church and to live lives of moral probity.

#### Summary – two major themes: the meaning of Christian baptism and the problem of persecution.

#### The meaning of baptism:

I Peter 1:3-4:11: a baptismal address to newly converted and baptized Christians concerning the meaning of their conversion from paganism to Christianity.

To these "newborn babes," Peter declares that to be baptized is to be "born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and to an inheritance which is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are guarded through faith for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1:3-5).

Although the genuineness of one's faith must be "tested by fire" – through trials and suffering – those who prevail in the struggle against the powers of darkness will obtain salvation of their souls (1:6-9).

True spiritual rebirth must express itself in holiness. An authentic faith must issue in good works.

As obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance, but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct. . . . And if you invoke as Father him who judges each one impartially according to his deeds, conduct yourselves with fear throughout the time of-your exile [in the fallen world]. You know that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your fathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot... . Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere love of the brethren, love one another earnestly from the heart. . . . So put away all malice and all guile and insincerity and envy and all slander. (1:13-2:3)

We are "born anew" in Christ in order that we might live according to the will of God.

Through baptism and spiritual rebirth, the believer becomes a part of Christ and his Church, a "living stone" in God's "spiritual house." Peter describes the Church as "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people" – the new Israel – whose task it is to "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light" (2:4-10).

Since the new Christian must learn to grow in holiness in and through the Church, Peter issues a number of moral admonitions on the nature of righteous living.

He exhorts his readers to "maintain good conduct among the Gentiles" (2:11-12) and to submit to established secular powers and institutions (2:13-20).

He comments on the proper relations between husbands and wives (3:1-7).

He calls all Christians to a life of moral seriousness: "Finally, all of you, have unity of spirit, sympathy, love of the brethren, a tender heart, and a humble mind. Do not return evil for evil or reviling for reviling; but on the contrary bless, for to this you have been called, that you may obtain a blessing.... For the eyes of the Lord are upon the righteous, and his ears are open to their prayer. But the face of the Lord is against those that do evil" (3:8-9, 12).

#### The meaning of persecution:

The conclusion to Peter's baptismal address (see 3:13-4:11) touches upon the second major theme of his letter: the problem of persecution and of suffering in general.

Baptism, he argues, is a participation in the suffering, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (3:13-22; see also 2:21-25).

It is also a preparation for the second coming of Christ, an opportunity to "make oneself ready" for "the end of all things" which is "at hand" (see 4:1-11).

The suffering of the Church as a result of persecution by the world is a sign of God's coming judgment upon the powers of evil.

Thus, Peter exhorts his readers to steadfastness in the faith, describing how to live and how not to live under persecution and in "the last days" (see 4:12-5:11). "Be sober, be watchful. Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking some one to devour."

But he also assures his readers that "after you have suffered a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, establish, and strengthen you" (5:6-11). To be baptized into Christ is to be baptized into his passion and death; but it is also to be raised with him in his resurrection and exaltation.

Thus, Peter places the problem of suffering in an eschatological context, looking toward the second coming of Christ for the meaning of the Church's tribulation. St. Peter would no doubt agree with St. Paul: "I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rm 8:18).

## **The Second Letter of Peter**

### Authorship and date of composition:

A matter of dispute among biblical scholars.

Tradition and most conservative commentators attribute the letter to St. Peter and assume that it was written c. 60-68 AD, probably from Rome, to the Christian churches of Asia Minor.

Many contemporary and less conservative scholars believe that the letter was written no earlier than 90 AD (long after Peter's death, ca. 67 AD) by a Christian who saw himself as continuing Peter's apostolic witness.

Central themes: The process of salvation, the problem of heresy in the Church, and the second coming of Christ.

### Summary:

#### The Relationship between Faith, Works and Salvation:

2 Peter 1: Christians must put their faith into practice in the form of good works. To live the Christian life, one must have "righteousness" (works) as well as "knowledge" (faith). Having "knowledge of God" through Jesus Christ, we must also strive to live according to "the righteousness of our God and Savior Jesus Christ" (1:1-2).

On the basis of our faith in Christ, God "has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness" and, through Christ, we have been called into the very glory and excellence of God (1:3).

The ultimate goal of our life in Christ is to "escape from the corruption that is in the world because of passion [that is, the lust of the 'flesh'], and become partakers of the divine nature" (1:4).

To actualize the salvation which has been offered in Christ, we must "make every effort to supplement...[our] faith with virtue," living lives that give practical expression to our "knowledge" of God. We must strive for self-control, steadfastness, godliness, brotherly affection, and love – a life that is not "ineffective or unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1:5-8). We must confirm our faith and our "call and election" through holy and righteous conduct in the world. For it is by way of a living faith that one may find "an entrance into the eternal kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ" (1:9-11).

#### The Problem of Heresy:

The heresies of intellectualism and Gnosticism differed from one another in many ways.

The intellectualists within the 1st century Church accepted the apostolic faith in almost all respects, but going to the opposite extreme from the Judaizers, they argued that salvation was a product of "faith alone," that good works were not a necessary part of the process of redemption.

The Gnostics went much further. As we have seen, Gnosticism denied the inherent goodness of the material creation and that God was the Creator of the world, and thought of Jesus as an angel who had taken on the appearance (but not the reality) of a man in order to bring the special "knowledge" (gnosis) required for deliverance

from the "evil" of materiality. The key to salvation was the separation of "spirit" from "matter." Man's basic need, from the Gnostic point of view, is to be liberated from the material realm and ushered into the realm of "pure spirit."

Gnosticism, then, was much more unorthodox than intellectualism. However, in spite of their differences, Gnosticism and intellectualism did have one thing in common; they both taught moral antinomianism. In Greek, *anti* means "against," and *nomos* means "law." An "antinomian" is one who denies the authority of the moral law.

The intellectualists were antinomians because of their belief that one can be saved through faith and without good works. Many of them, therefore, lived in opposition to the moral teachings of the Church, especially those teachings relating to sexual behavior.

The Gnostics, too, rejected the moral teachings of the apostolic community; they were particularly notorious for their reputed sexual libertinism. Gnosticism, however, was not indifferent to the spiritual value of good works, as was intellectualism.

Physical sin, from the Gnostic point of view, might actually be considered a form of "good" behavior. If it is true that spirit alone is good and that matter is absolutely evil, then to engage in physical debauchery may be construed as a sign of one's contempt for the body, of one's denial of the moral and spiritual value of the material world. Gluttony, drunkenness, promiscuity, and other physical "sins," therefore, may well lead us into the life of the spirit!

Peter's insistence upon the necessity of both orthodox belief and good conduct in the process of salvation is directed against the intellectualists and Gnostics.

These "false prophets" and "false teachers," following "cleverly devised myths," have insidiously introduced "destructive heresies" into the Christian community (1:16, 2:1).

These heresies are contrary to Christ and will lead many people into "licentiousness" (2:1-2); many unsteady Christians will be swept away by "the lust of defiling passion" and will come to despise the authority of the moral law (2:10).

Some who are enticed "with licentious passions of the flesh," and thus entangled in and overpowered by "the defilements of the world," may actually apostatize (i.e., renounce their faith) and so lose their salvation in Christ (2:18-22; see also Heb 6:4-8).

Peter warns his readers that those who reject or abandon the apostolic faith, and those who teach and practice moral antinomianism, will face condemnation and eternal punishment on the day of judgment, along with the devil and his fallen angels.

Those who keep the faith and live righteously, however, will be ultimately delivered from all evil and live forever in the kingdom of God (see 2:4-10).

#### The Second Coming of Christ:

Second Peter was written at least thirty years after the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ.

During his earthly ministry, the Lord had promised his disciples that he would "come again" some day to lead the people of God into the heavenly kingdom (see Mt 24:29-31; Mk 13:24-27; Lk 21:25-28; Jn 14:1-4).

Many of the first Christians were convinced that the second advent of Christ would occur during their own lifetime; but with the passage of time, it became clear that the Lord's return could not be predicted and that it might not take place according to human expectations.

By the time Peter wrote his second epistle (c. 60-68 AD), the "delay" of the second coming had become something of a problem for the Church. Those who were seeking to discredit the apostolic witness seized upon this "problem" and scoffed at the faith of the Church. Peter

quotes these scoffers as saying, "Where is the promise of his coming? For ever since the fathers [the Old Testament patriarchs] fell asleep, all things have continued as they were from the beginning of creation" (3:3-4). Chapter 3 of 2 Peter was written in response to this criticism.

Peter warns that "the heavens and earth that now exist have been stored up for fire, being kept until the day of judgment and [the] destruction of ungodly men" (3:7).

He goes on to explain that the Lord's "delay" in returning to the world is based upon his forbearance toward sinners: "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (3:9).

The time allotted to sinners to see the errors of their ways and to repent is not infinite in duration. Peter exhorts his readers to make themselves ready without hesitation for the second advent of Christ and for the divine judgment which is coming upon the world (see 3:14-18).

Peter proclaims that "the day of the Lord will come like a thief [i.e., suddenly and unexpectedly], and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and the works that are upon it will be burned up" (3:10).

Looking toward and hoping for "the coming of the day of the Lord," Christians must strive to live according to holiness and godliness (3:11-12). Until that day, we must struggle to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ" (3:18), that we may enter into the "new heavens and...new earth" that will follow the great and dreadful day of the Lord (3:13).

## The Letters of John

### Date of composition, authorship, audiences:

Written from Ephesus c. 90 AD.

The fathers of the Church attributed these letters to the apostle John, who, as bishop of the churches in Asia Minor, lived in Ephesus during the later years of the first century.

As indicated earlier, only 1 John is a "catholic" letter in the strict sense; 2 John was intended for one of the local congregations in Asia Minor, and 3 John is addressed to "Gaius," apparently a personal friend of the author.

### Central theme: Anti-Gnosticism:

The letters of St. John (and especially 1 and 2 John) were written in order to counteract the spread of Gnosticism in the early Church.

We have already noted that the central doctrine of the Gnostics is a spirit-matter dualism in which the goodness and spiritual significance of the material creation are denied.

The Gnostics also teach a doctrine of "salvation through illumination," according to which deliverance from material bondage is to be effected by the acquisition of a special kind of "knowledge." Only those who are initiated into the Gnostic fellowship can receive this "knowledge," for God had revealed his "truth" to the Gnostics alone.

The Gnostics distinguish between three different kinds of people: (1) the "men of spirit" (or *pneumatikoi*), who have been fully introduced into the Gnostic mysteries; (2) the "men of soul" (or *psychikoi*), who are seekers after the wisdom of Gnosticism; and (3) the "men of flesh" (or *sarkikoi*), who are not interested in Gnosticism and therefore are hopelessly lost in an evil world.

There are only a few "men of soul" and still fewer "men of spirit"; the vast majority of the human race are "men of flesh." Gnosticism, therefore, is a kind of spiritual elitism that depicted most human beings as beneath contempt.

Those Christians who are led astray by Gnosticism, who regard the Gnostic world-view as the true but esoteric version of Christianity, see themselves as a spiritual elite within the Church. They consider the apostolic faith, which is proclaimed to all rather than whispered to a few, to be both false and vulgar. The apostolic teaching that the material universe had been created by God and was thus essentially good, and that the divine Word had "become flesh" in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, is incompatible with the radical anti-materialism of Gnosticism. Those who adhere to the "materialistic" witness of the apostles, therefore, are "men of flesh," or, at best, "men of soul," to be recruited into the "true faith" of Gnostic spiritualism. Thus, in those Christian communities where Gnosticism gains a foothold, there spring up divisions and factions that threaten the unity of the body of Christ. For the Gnostics are "religious snobs, claiming to have a special revelation of their own. They...[are] the 'spiritual' ones, the enlightened aristocracy, the religious elite."

### Summary:

#### The general content:

John repudiates the spiritual elitism of the Gnostics as well as their moral antinomianism and their rejection of the Christian doctrine of the incarnation. In response to the false doctrine, immorality, and religious snobbery of the Gnostics, John stresses the need for right belief concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ, the seriousness of sin and the need for obedience to God's moral law, and the need for all Christians to love one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

#### Cerinthianism – the form of Gnosticism criticized in the Johannine letters:

Cerinthus was the leader of a Gnostic sect in Ephesus. He claimed to possess the secret key to the "real truth" of Christianity.

Like all Gnostics, Cerinthus denied the full divinity and the real humanity of Christ. He made a distinction between the Father and the Son, according to which the Son (or "the Christ") was an angelic emanation from the Father and thus not "true God."

Cerinthus also maintained that "the Son and Christ" only seemed to take on human flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. Because the Greek for the verb "to seem" is *dokeo*, the Gnostic view of the incarnation is sometimes called "docetism."

In Cerinthus's version of docetism, Jesus of Nazareth was an ordinary man until he was baptized by John the Baptist. "At that point the heavenly Christ descended upon him, and remained until the completion of the revelation that he had come to communicate. Thereupon the supernatural [but not divine] Christ left Jesus, who became a man again and as such was crucified. His death, however, signified nothing, since Christ had by that time left him." (Neil)

#### John's critique of Cerinthianism:

John denounces Cerinthus as an "antichrist." Insisting upon the unity of the Father and the Son, John declares that "no one who denies [the deity of] the Son has the Father" and that "he who confesses the Son [as divine] has the Father also" (1 Jn 2:22-23). John also insists upon the incarnation of the divine Son of God in the person of Jesus of Nazareth:

That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon [with our eyes] and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life – the life was made manifest, and we saw it, and testify to it, and proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father [from all eternity] and was made manifest to us. (1 Jn 1:1-2)

He who denies that the Word of life was "made manifest" in Jesus of Nazareth, that Jesus is the Christ or that "Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" is a liar and false prophet (see 1 Jn 2:22, 4:2; and 2 Jn 7-11).

John goes on to argue, against Cerinthus, that the divine identity of Jesus was made manifest both in his baptism and in his crucifixion:

Jesus is the [divine] Son of God. This is he who came by water [his baptism] and blood [his crucifixion], not with the water only but with the water and the blood. And the [Holy] Spirit [who lives in and inspires the apostolic Church] is the witness [to the divinity of Jesus], because the Spirit is the truth. There are three witnesses, the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree (1 Jn 5:5-13).

#### Right Belief:

In John's view, the maintenance of right belief concerning the incarnation of God the Son in Jesus Christ is necessary to salvation. Through faith in Jesus as the "hypostatic (or personal) union" of God and man, the believer may enter into the eternal life of heaven.

Every one who believes that Jesus is the Christ is a child of God. . . . [and] whatever is born of God overcomes the world; and this is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith. Who is it that overcomes the world but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 Jn 5:1, 4-5)

Any one who goes ahead and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ [as preached by the apostles] does not have God; he who abides in the doctrine has both the Father and the Son (2 Jn 9).

#### Right conduct:

In addition to his emphasis upon the need for right belief, John also exhorts his Christian readers to practice right conduct.

"God is light and in him there is no darkness at all" (1 Jn 1:5). If we are to have fellowship with God, therefore, we must not walk in the darkness of sin but rather in the light of Christ, who has delivered us from the power of sin (1 Jn 1:6-2:2).

We must make every effort to keep the moral commandments of God and to conform ourselves to the image and likeness of God in Christ; and "he who says he abides in . . . [Christ] ought to walk in the same way in which he walked [that is, in perfect obedience to God]" (1 Jn 2: 3-6).

Christians, of course, do not measure up to the perfection of Christ. The followers of Christ sin frequently, and sometimes grievously (1 Jn 1:8, 10). However, he who is "born of God," according to John, can never live a life of moral indifference or outright immorality, he will never make sin the standard practice of his life.

The true Christian has "God's nature" abiding in him in the person of the Holy Spirit, and he will seek to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in the process of sanctification (see 1 Jn 3:4-10, 4:13-15).

When a Christian fails to live up to the moral and spiritual standards of God, he will confess his sins to the Lord and seek forgiveness and renewal in and through Christ and his Church (1 Jn 1:9-2:2).

Contrary to the antinomian teaching of the Gnostics, if we are to enter into the divine sonship of Christ and the eternal life of the Holy Trinity, we must live righteous lives according to the moral law of God (see 1 Jn 3:1-3; 2 Jn 4-6). For "he who does good is of God; [and] he who does evil has not seen God" (3 Jn 11).

Right love – anti-elitism:

John also attacks the spiritual elitism of the Gnostics. He who has received true enlightenment through Christ will love his brothers and sisters in the Church.

"He who loves his brother abides in the light. . . . But he who hates his brother is in the darkness and walks in the darkness, and does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded his eyes" (1 Jn 2:9-11).

A true Christian will not, like the Gnostics, despise his fellow Christians because of their ignorance. He will love them in Christ and pray for their edification in the truth of the faith.

A life of Christian love is essential to a life in God, for God is himself the source and foundation of love.

Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation for our sins. Beloved, if God has so loved us, we also ought to love one another.... God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also. (1 Jn 4:7-12, 16-17, 19-21)

We are to live, then, not only in the truth of God, but also in his love (2 Jn 1-6). He who holds to the truth of the apostolic faith and seeks to live in the unity of love with all members of the Church of Christ, will live in the "grace, mercy, and peace" of God the Father.

Life in God, then, requires right belief, right conduct, and right love:

Our life in the world must be grounded in our love of God and of our brethren in the Church.

We must, in the name of the gospel of Christ, be in the world; but we must not be of the world.

John admonishes us not to "love the world or the things in the world." To live according to "the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the pride of life" is to live in violation of the will of God. We must always remember that "the world passes away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides for ever" (1 Jn 3:15-17). If we will accept Christ as Savior and Lord and struggle to live according to the will of God, then we will receive the fullness of the Holy Spirit, our glorification (1 Jn 3:21-24, 4:13).

Speaking for the apostolic community, John proclaims, "we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God" (1 Jn 4:14-15).

If we live in God through right belief, then we will practice right conduct under the authority of God's moral law and we will love our fellow Christians in the love which has been shown to us in Jesus Christ.

## The Letter of Jude

### Authorship, date of composition, audience:

Written by "Jude, a servant of Jesus Christ and brother of James."

It is not known who this Jude was. Some believe him to have been one of the early disciples of Christ, perhaps even an apostle, while others hold that he was a church leader of the late first century.

Controversy concerning the letter's date of composition. "Some date this letter in the sixties of the first century, others around AD 150."

The canonicity of the letter of St. Jude was disputed by a number of ecclesiastical authorities in the early Church, but it was ultimately accepted as part of the New Testament canon during the 4th century AD.

The letter is addressed to all Christians.

### Central theme:

The letter expresses grave concern with reference to the rise of heresy in the Church. Jude's intention is to defend "the faith which was once delivered to the saints," i.e., the apostolic witness to Christ (v. 3). He points out that the Church had been infiltrated by false teachers, "ungodly persons who pervert the grace of our God into licentiousness and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ" (v. 4). It would appear, therefore, that the heresy Jude had in mind was Gnosticism; for as we have seen, the Gnostics denied the deity of Jesus Christ and encouraged their followers to practice moral antinomianism.

### Summary:

Jude warns his readers that doctrinal and moral heresy will be punished by God (vv. 15-16).

He calls upon them to live according to the teachings of the apostles (vv. 2, 20-21).

All heretics will have to face the judgment of God on the last day; "but you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life" (vv. 20-21).

Christians must also work to save weak souls from the abomination of heresy: "convince some, who doubt; save some, by snatching them out of the fire; on some have mercy with fear, hating even the garment spotted by flesh" (v. 22).

The letter of Jude ends with a beautiful benediction: "Now to him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Savior through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen" (vv. 24-25).

## Summary statement on the catholic epistles:

The catholic epistles are especially concerned with the problem of heresy in the Church, with the corruption of the Church by the temptations of the world, and with the practical as well as the theoretical meaning of the Christian faith.

James, Peter, John and Jude insist that the Christian faith requires both true belief and good works. We are not saved by "faith alone," nor are we saved by "works alone."

According to the apostolic tradition, we enter into fellowship with God – we become "partakers of the divine nature" – through faith in Christ and through a life of moral and spiritual struggle and growth in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Our life in the Church is a life of growth toward union with God, through faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and in the sanctifying grace of the Holy Spirit.