THE EQUIP INSTITUTE Theme: Christian Story Topic: General Epistles and Revelation Fall 2023 Introduction The Equip Institute exists to equip members of Taylors First Baptist Church to think rightly about God and His Word for the sake of living rightly before God in His world. This fall, we are spending twelve weeks studying the Christian Story. Last time, we discussed Paul's Epistles. We conclude our series with a survey of the General Epistles and Revelation. The General Epistles The eight non-Pauline letters are called General Epistles because Paul didn't write them, and they were accepted as Scripture by the wider church by the turn of the second century. Two apostles wrote General Epistles (John and Peter). Two of Jesus's siblings also wrote General Epistles (James and Jude). What we know about date and original recipients varies, depending upon the epistle. We will briefly introduce each of the General Epistles. Like with Paul's letters, we will not get bogged down in debates between conservative and liberal scholars, or between Catholics and Protestants, but we will assume the conservative evangelical positions are correct. We will discuss the letters in the order they were likely written rather than canonical order. <u>James</u> James is likely the earliest document in the New Testament, written before James was martyred around 45. We don't know for certain who James wrote to, though it was likely a group of Jewish believers outside Palestine. He focuses more on Christian living than doctrine. Major themes: Overcoming trials in the Christian life Not showing preference toward the rich over the poor



The importance of godly wisdom in the Christian life The role good works play in validating authentic faith

The impact of our words for good or ill

1-2 Peter Peter was likely martyred under Nero between 65 and 67, meaning he likely wrote 1 and 2 Peter in the early-to-mid 60s. The letters were written to Christians in Asia Minor who were likely Gentile believers. Major themes in 1 Peter: The church as an exile people Faithfully enduring persecution The church's fulfillment of several motifs originally applied to Israel (the elect, kingdom of priests, God's temple) Living in light of the second coming Jesus's substitutionary atonement for sinners The importance of personal holiness in the Christian How to rightly order relationships in the home and society Major themes in 2 Peter: The marks of spiritual maturity The inspiration and authority of Scripture The danger of false teachers God's coming judgment against sin and rescue of His people at the end of the age Jude Jude was possibly written in the mid-60s, around the same time Peter was writing his epistles, but nobody knows for certain. We do not know to whom Jude was writing, though it may have been believers in Asia minor, since the letter uses similar language to 2 Peter in several places and several themes overlap. Major themes: Contending for the true faith Resisting false teachers God's grace in preserving authentic believers in the faith 1, 2, and 3 John

John is the same apostle who wrote the Gospel of John and Revelation. He wrote his three letters near the end of

the first century and sometime before he wrote Revelation in the mid-90s. By this time, early second-century writers tell us John was the only surviving apostle and was thus revered as an "elder statesman" in the church. The three letters may have been written to different groups of Christians and they may not have been written in the order in which they appear in the canon.

Major themes in 1 John include:

- Jesus's deity and humanity
- The unity between the Father and the Son
- Jesus's incarnation, atonement, and advocacy on behalf of believers
- The eternal life given to believers
- Universal human sinfulness
- The role of love in obeying God's commandments
- The evidence of authentic faith

2 John was likely written to a particular congregation, though he refers to them as the "elect lady." The main themes are the role of love in obeying God's commandments the need to resist false teachers.

3 John is addressed to a believer named Gaius, but it was likely intended for his entire church. The letter encourages Gaius to support itinerant evangelists who were spreading the gospel, to ignore a troublemaker named Diotrephes, and it commends a godly believer named Demetrius (who may have delivered the letter). John refers to himself as an elder, which might refer to his age or might mean he was pastoring a church at this stage in his ministry.

Hebrews

The author of Hebrews is a mystery. Throughout church history, plausible theories have included Barnabas, Apollos, Luke, Clement of Rome, and Paul. The book was written to Jewish believers, though it is unclear where they were located. It was possibly originally a recorded sermon rather than a letter. Hebrews was likely written prior to the destruction of the Temple in 70 since the author would have almost certainly mentioned that event.

Hebrews is a doctrinally rich book that engages deeply with the Old Testament and focuses significant attention on Jesus's identity. Those themes include:

Jesus is fully divine and fully human

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- Jesus is the Creator and Sustainer of all things
- Jesus is superior to Moses, the Aaronic priesthood, the earthly Tabernacle and Temple, and even angels
- Jesus represents a forever Priesthood
- As High Priest, Jesus offered up Himself as a forever sacrifice for sinners

Other major themes in Hebrews:

- The importance of faith
- The superiority of the new covenant to the old covenant
- Warnings that believers must persevere in their new covenant faith rather than rejecting Jesus for the old covenant
- Christians are now living in the last days and God's will one day judge sin

The Book of Revelation

John wrote Revelation in the mid-90s and it was almost certainly the last New Testament book that was written. John says most of the book records a vision he received from God while exiled on the Island of Patmos. The original recipients were the seven churches in Asia Minor who are addressed chapters 2 and 3. Revelation includes elements of two biblical genres: apocalyptic and prophecy. The book is filled with symbolic language and addresses events that were happening at the time and that will happen in the future.

Chapter 1 includes a brief prologue and describes how John received the vision from God. Chapters 2 and 3 focus on specific messages to the seven churches. Chapters 3 through 20 include a cycle of visions that culminate in the Second Coming and Last Judgment. Revelation 21:1–22:5 describe the new creation. Revelation 22:6–21 offers encouragement to readers to be ready for the Second Coming and warns against adding to the prophesies.

Major themes:

- Jesus will be fully victorious over all His enemies at the end of the age
- Satan is real and he uses a variety of means to deceive humans and persecute believers
- God is pouring out His wrath against sin, which will escalate at the end of the age

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- Christians should remain faithful, regardless of trials and tribulations
- The Great Commission will be fulfilled (every tribe, tongue, and nation)
- The final culmination of creation is the new creation, which will last for all eternity

There are three significant debates about Revelation among evangelicals. The first concerns how the visions relate to history. There are four major schools of thought.

Historicism: Revelation unfolds chronologically, the chapters figuratively describe successive eras of church history, and Revelation 19–22 speak of the end of the age.

Futurism: Revelation unfolds chronologically, but everything after chapter 3 happens so far in the future that none of them have yet occurred.

Preterism: All or most of Revelation refers to events contemporary to John that took place in the first century. Full preterism is not an option for conservatives because it treats the Second Coming, Last Judgment, and new creation as figurative. Evangelicals who hold to this view are *partial preterists*.

Idealism: Revelation figuratively addresses recurring themes present throughout church history, though the bulk of the book should be understood cyclically rather than chronologically. The final chapters speak of events still to unfold.

The second debate concerns the nature of the "thousand years" mentioned in Revelation 20:1–6.

Premillennialism: Jesus will return before the millennium and reigns over the earth physically as a foretaste of the new creation. Postmillennialism is generally pessimistic about the prospects for the church in the years prior to the Second Coming. Premillennialism assumes a futurist interpretation of Revelation, though it can be combined with elements of historicism or idealism.

Postmillennialism: Jesus will return following the millennium, which may be a literal millennium or may just represent the culmination of the church age.

Postmillennialism is generally optimistic about the prospects for the church in the years prior to the Second Coming. Postmillennialism can be either futurist or partial

preterist in its orientation, and like premillennialism, postmillennialism can be combined with elements of historicism or idealism.

Amillennialism: Jesus will return at the end of the church age, but the millennium refers figuratively to all the church age. Amillennialism is generally ambivalent about the future of the church's progress prior to the Second Coming. Amillennialism normally assumes an idealist interpretation of Revelation, though it can be combined with elements of historicism of partial preterism.

The final debate is among premillennialists and concerns the relationship of the Great Tribulation, rapture, and Second Coming.

Pre-tribulational premillennialists believe the rapture and the Second Coming are different events. The mostly Gentile church will be raptured prior to the Great Tribulation. Jesus then returns with the raptured saints, leading to the mass conversion of those Jews who survive the Great Tribulation. The millennium then begins as the Jewish believers are fully restored to the land of Israel and Jesus reigns physically from Jerusalem.

Post-tribulational premillennialists believe the rapture and the Second Coming are the same event. The church will go through the Great Tribulation, and during this time the mass conversion of the Jews will take place. Jesus then returns and the millennium begins. Post-tribulational premillennialists debate whether or not the Jews will be restored to the land of Israel and Jesus will reign physically from Jerusalem.

Recommended Resources

D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, Introducing the New Testament: A Short Guide to Its History and Message, ed. Andrew David Naselli (Zondervan, 2013).

Andreas J. Köstenberger, L. Scott Kellum, and Charles L. Quarles, *The Cradle, the Cross, and the Crown: An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (B&H Academic, 2016).

Brandon D. Crowe, The Message of the General Epistles in the History of Redemption: Wisdom from James, Peter, John, and Jude (P&R, 2015).

(The Good	u an Anchor for the Sou d Book Company, 2021

Michael Kruger, Hebrews for You: