

Notes on 2 John

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The writer identified himself as "the elder" (v. 1). The writings of the early church fathers attribute authorship of this epistle to the Apostle John. The early Christians commonly recognized him as "the elder" in view. We might have expected John to describe himself as "the apostle," as Paul usually did, since this is an office of higher authority than elder. However, John's apostleship was not open to challenge as Paul's was. There is no evidence that the early Christians questioned it as they did Paul's apostleship. "Elder" was a more affectionate title, and it undoubtedly represented John's role among the churches, at least unofficially if not officially. He was probably an older man at this time too.

"Unlike 1 John, 2 and 3 John fall into the category of personal letters."¹

"These are notes snatched from the every-day correspondence of an Apostle."²

The identity of the recipient or recipients of this epistle is in question. Some scholars have concluded that John wrote to a specific lady and her children (v. 1).³ Of these interpreters some believe her name was Eklekta (from the Greek word *eklekte* meaning "chosen", v. 1). This seems unlikely, however, because John also called this lady's sister *eklekte* in verse 13. Others who believe he wrote to a specific lady have suggested that her name was Kyria (the Greek form of the name "Martha," translated "mistress" or "lady," v. 1).⁴ However this too seems unlikely in view of the plural address John used in verse 8. A more probable explanation is that John personified a particular local church as a lady and the Christians in it as her children (cf. 1 Pet. 5:13).⁵ This view harmonizes with the personification of the church as Christ's bride (Eph. 5:22-23; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7). There are several other examples of greetings from one church to another in the New Testament (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 16:19-20; Phil. 4:21). Since John's arena of ministry was Asia Minor, the probability of this being a church in that Roman province is good.

¹I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 9.

²G. G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal*, p. 4.

³E.g., Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:534.

⁴E.g., David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:162.

⁵See William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, pp. 152-53, for discussion of these views.

Findlay argued for the church in Pergamum being the "chosen lady" (v. 1), and the church in Ephesus being her "chosen sister" (v. 13).⁶

The conditions existing in the church that John addressed are very similar to those he referred to in his first epistle. Therefore the time of composition seems to have been very close to that of 1 John: A.D. 90-95. Ephesus seems to be the most probable site from which John wrote both letters.⁷

"2 and 3 John therefore furnish, in default of other material, a kind of setting and framework to 1 John."⁸

"You must recall that John is the apostle who writes of the family of God. Paul writes of the church of God, while Peter writes of the government of God."⁹

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction vv. 1-3
- II. The importance of the truth vv. 4-11
 - A. Practicing the truth vv. 4-6
 - B. Protecting the truth vv. 7-11
- III. Conclusion vv. 12-13

The following is a good expository outline of the book.¹⁰

The truth generates an exclusive Christian community (vv. 1-3).

The truth demands a distinctive Christian ethic (vv. 4-6).

The truth involves propositional Christian doctrine (v. 7).

The truth requires unceasing Christian vigilance (vv. 8-11).

MESSAGE

A summary statement of the message of this epistle could be as follows: "Abiding in the truth is essential to maintaining brotherly love." Let me try to clarify what John was saying in this epistle.

First, he wrote that *revealed truth is foundational* for the Christian. John emphasized the importance of revealed truth in five ways: (1) He based his own love on it (v. 1a). (2) He based the love of all Christians on it (v. 1b). (3) He based his writing of this epistle on it

⁶Findlay, pp. 30-32.

⁷Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, p. 675.

⁸Findlay, p. 5.

⁹J. Vernon McGee, "The Second Epistle of John," in *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:821.

¹⁰Roy Clements, Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, England, July 19, 1992.

(v. 2). (4) He based the three great Christian graces on it (v. 3). And (5) he commended his readers for basing their lives on it (v. 4).

By "the truth," John meant the teachings of Christ (v. 9). This includes all that Jesus approved as God's revelation (the Old Testament), and all that He taught personally and through His apostles following His ascension (the New Testament; cf. Acts 1:1).

We must keep the importance of *God's truth in balance*. On the one hand, it is *the only* foundation that will adequately support a proper relationship with God and other people. It is the source of our knowledge of God's commandments. As such, it is the basis of our relationship with God and other people (v. 8). On the other hand, it is *only* the foundation for a proper relationship with God and other people. We must "abide" in that truth. Abiding involves not just intellectual assent to orthodoxy, but a vital relationship in which God controls us. Walking in "the light" of God's truth (1 John 1:7) makes this relationship possible.

Second, John wrote that "love" *for others* is the *fruit of abiding in the truth*. He regarded love for other people as very important for the Christian. His perspective harmonizes with the teachings of the Mosaic Law and Jesus Christ (v. 5). He also regarded love for others as essentially obedience to the will of God (v. 6). When we obey God, we do what is best for others. This is what it means to love others. When we abide in the truth, we will love.

Third, John warned against *separating love from the truth*. In John's day, some people were rejecting the truth but trying to hold on to love. They claimed to have progressed from elementary truth to advanced truth, but really they had abandoned the truth (vv. 7-9). John counseled his readers to give the false teachers no encouragement (vv. 10-11). He did not counsel them to withhold love from them.

In our day, some people are making the same appeal. We need to beware of appeals to follow teaching that deviates from Scripture. Watch out for appeals that claim a more advanced knowledge of spiritual truth than what the Bible reveals (e.g., the cults). We can learn from this letter how to relate to false teachers. We should not encourage them in their work, but we should reach out to them in love. I once heard a speaker at a conference say, "It doesn't matter too much what we believe as long as we love each other." John would not agree. John wrote that it matters very much what we believe, because what we believe will determine if we really "love each other." *Abiding in the truth* is essential to maintaining brotherly love. This is the essential message of this brief letter.

If we want to love other Christians consistently, we will find this easiest to do when we abide in the truth and abide in Christ. While unbelievers and non-abiding believers can and do love other people, it is hardest for them to love abiders in Christ. They have less in common with us, and they often feel convicted by us.¹¹

In view of these emphases, it is not surprising that 2 John, along with 3 John, have been called "the Pastoral Epistles of John."¹²

¹¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:177-93.

¹²Findlay, p. 6.

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION vv. 1-3

John introduced himself, identified the recipients of this letter, greeted them, and mentioned the major subjects of his concern to prepare his readers for what follows.

vv. 1-2 As explained in the introduction section of these notes, the "elder" was evidently the Apostle John, the "chosen lady" a local church, and her "children" the believers in that church.

"It may well be that the address is deliberately unidentifiable. The letter was written at a time when persecution was a real possibility. If the letter were to fall into the wrong hands, there might well be trouble. And it may well be that the letter is addressed in such a way that to the insider its destination is quite clear, while to the outsider it would look like a personal letter from one friend to another. The address may in fact be a skilful attempt to baffle any hostile person into whose hands the letter might come; and, if that is so, our difficulty in identifying the person or Church to whom the letter is addressed is nothing other than a tribute to the skill of John."¹³

The church was "chosen" in that it consisted of elect individuals: Christians.

"We are hardly to think here of an elder in the sense which the word *presbyteros* usually bears in Christian contexts in the New Testament, that is, one who discharges the ministry of eldership in a local church. . . . The word appears in another specialized sense in second-century Christian literature, of church leaders in the generation after the apostles, particularly those who were disciples of apostles or of 'apostolic men,' and were therefore guarantors of the 'tradition' which they received from the apostles and delivered in turn to their own followers."¹⁴

John loved this church and so did other Christians who knew about it. The basis of this love was the truth the Christians there believed in common with one another. This "truth" refers to God's revelation in Scripture. The importance of this truth is clear from the fact that John referred to it three times in these two verses.

¹³Barclay, p. 162.

¹⁴F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 135. See Irenaeus (ca. A.D. 130-202), *Against Heresies*, 5.5.1; 5.36.2; *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, 3.39.

"The Truth makes true love possible."¹⁵

- v. 3 John wanted his readers to appreciate the importance of guarding God's truth and practicing love for one another. These two things are the basis for grace, mercy, and peace (cf. Eph. 2:4-5). "Grace" is God's unmerited favor, "mercy" is compassion, and "peace" is harmony and inner tranquillity.

"The succession 'grace, mercy, peace' marks the order from the first notion of God to the final satisfaction of man."¹⁶

These qualities flourish where truth and love prevail.

"When divorced from truth, love is little more than sentimentality or humanism. If I truly care about my brothers, then I will want them to know, and live according to, God's truth."¹⁷

"Where 'truth and love' coexist harmoniously, we have a well-balanced Christian character (cf. Eph. 4.15)."¹⁸

John's description of Jesus Christ as the Son of God the Father is reminiscent of his emphasis on Jesus' full deity both in his first epistle and in his Gospel.

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE TRUTH VV. 4-11

"In the central section of 2 John [vv. 4-11] . . . we have a brief summary of the great contrasts between truth and error, love and hatred, the Church and the world, which are dealt with at greater length in 1 John."¹⁹

A. PRACTICING THE TRUTH VV. 4-6

John wrote this epistle to urge his readers to continue to be obedient to God by responding positively to the truth of His revelation. He also wanted them to resist the inroads of false teachers who sought to distort this truth. He dealt with the first purpose in verses 4-6.

- v. 4 John began by commending the church. He had met some of its members who were walking in obedience to God's truth (i.e., walking in the light, 1 John 1:7).

¹⁵B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, p. 225.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles of John*, p. 255.

¹⁸Bruce, p. 139.

¹⁹Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 322. Cf. John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 205.

"It is much easier to study the truth, or even argue about the truth, than it is to practice it!"²⁰

". . . truth is cleared of all doubt when, not sustained by external props, it serves as its own support."²¹

- v. 5 John's message for this church was not some new revelation. It was a reminder to keep on walking in obedience to God's truth by continuing to love one another (cf. 1 John 2:3-9; 3:14-18, 23; 4:7, 11, 20-21). This was important since false teachers were encouraging the readers to depart from the truth they were hearing (v. 6).

"It is not that love precedes truth or belief but that love offers the clearest test of the truthfulness of the confession and the sincerity of the obedience given to God's commands. Belief may be feigned and confession only of the lips, but love is harder to counterfeit."²²

- v. 6 If anyone had a question about what loving one another meant, John explained that it is essentially obeying God (cf. 1 John 5:2-3a). That is, we love each other best when we obey God's will that His Word reveals.

"Love strives to realise in detail every separate expression of the will of God."²³

The antecedent of the last word in this verse is not clear in the English text or the Greek text. "It" could refer to "love" or "commandment." The latter alternative seems somewhat more likely in view of John's argument. In this case John's point was that his readers should obey God's commands as they had heard these from the beginning of the apostles' preaching (cf. 1 John 1:1). They should not obey the gospel that the false teachers were proclaiming.

All the specific "commandments" of God are really one "commandment" or obligation for the Christian (cf. 1 John 3:22-23).

B. PROTECTING THE TRUTH VV. 7-11

Next John moved on to his second purpose. He wrote to encourage his readers to resist the false teachers who were distorting the truth and deceiving some of the believers.

²⁰Wiersbe, 2:535.

²¹John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1:8:1.

²²Glenn W. Barker, "2 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 363.

²³Westcott, p. 228.

"The presbyter's attention now moves from the existence of true belief inside the Johannine community, which gives him great joy (v 4), to the dangers presented to it through the espousal of false belief by deceivers who have 'defected into the world.' Earlier, the writer has spoken of Christian truth and love; in the remainder of 2 John the emphasis inevitably falls on the need for truth in contrast to error. But the two sections interlock. Departure from the truth results in a failure of love. Thus the dark description of heretical secession and its consequences (vv 7-11) forms the basis of John's warm appeal for love and unity (vv 4-6)."²⁴

v. 7 This verse gives the reason for the exhortation in verse 6 and links what follows with verses 4-6.

". . . the wandering prophets and preachers did present a problem. Their position was one which was singularly liable to abuse. They had an enormous prestige; and it was possible for the most undesirable characters to enter into a way of life in which they moved from place to place, living in very considerable comfort at the expense of the local congregations. A clever rogue could make a very comfortable living as an itinerant prophet. Even the pagan satirists saw this. Lucian, the Greek writer, in his work called the *Peregrinus*, draws the picture of a man who had found the easiest possible way of making a living without working. He was an itinerant charlatan who lived on the fat of the land by travelling round the various communities of the Christians, and settling down wherever he liked, and living luxuriously at their expense."²⁵

Erroneous teaching had already begun to proliferate in the early church (e.g., Gnosticism, Docetism, Cerinthianism, etc.; cf. 1 John 2:18, 22-23, 27; 4:1-3). The common error was Christological. The false teachers regarded Jesus as something other than God's Anointed One who had come in the flesh (cf. 1 John 5:1). "Coming" in the flesh means having come and continuing in flesh. This is the true view of the Incarnation. Jesus was and continues to be fully God and fully man.

"Christ is never said to come *into* flesh, but *in* flesh; the former would leave room for saying that deity was united with Jesus sometime after his birth."²⁶

"The incarnation was more than a mere incident, and more than a temporary and partial connection between the Logos and human nature. It was the permanent guarantee of the

²⁴Smalley, p. 327.

²⁵Barclay, p. 156.

²⁶Charles C. Ryrie, "The Second Epistle of John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1480.

possibility of fellowship, and the chief means by which it is brought about."²⁷

This type of false teacher is a deceiver as well as opposed to Christ. John did not mean that such a person was the end-time Antichrist. The use of the definite article in Greek, translated "the," used with an unnamed individual as here, sometimes translates better with the English indefinite article "a" or "an." That understanding of this statement is preferable here in view of other Scriptures that indicate the end-time Antichrist has yet to appear (e.g., Dan. 11; 2 Thess. 2).

"The elder says that anybody who denies the truth is a very antichrist, just as we might speak of a supremely evil person as 'the very devil.'"²⁸

- v. 8 Compromise with the false teachers could lead to a loss of reward (cf. the warning passages in Hebrews).²⁹ Moreover loss for John's readers would involve loss for him as well since he had a share in their lives. This loss would only be partial, however. They would still receive some reward (cf. 1 Cor. 3:11-15).³⁰ Loss of salvation is not in view at all.

"The readers are warned to take heed that the deceivers do not undo the work which the apostles and evangelists had done, so that they might receive a full reward."³¹

"John is anxious that they shall hold on with him to the finish."³²

"Every believer ought to be working for a reward, to be able to hear Him say someday, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant' (see Matt. 25:21 [cf. 2 Tim. 4:7-8])."³³

- v. 9 The picture in John's mind seems to have been that of a Christian who, the false teachers said, did not have the whole truth. It is common even today for false teachers to claim that those who do not agree with them are still intellectual infants. However, John regarded that "infantile" position as proper for the Christian (cf. Matt. 10:16). If his readers advanced beyond it, they would really step out of the truth into error. John warned his readers of the danger of apostasy, namely, forsaking truth to embrace error (cf. 1 John 2:23-24).

²⁷A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, p. 175.

²⁸Marshall, p. 71.

²⁹Barker, pp. 364-65; Marshall, p. 72.

³⁰See Zane C. Hodges, "2 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 907.

³¹Ryrie, p. 1480.

³²A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:253.

³³McGee, 5:832.

"Theology is to God's revelation in Grace as Science is to His revelation in Nature; and just as Science is always discovering more of the wonders of the First Creation, so Theology is always entering more deeply into the glory of the New Creation and appropriating more of the treasures which are hidden in Christ. . . . St. John does not condemn theological progress; he defines its limits: 'abide in the teaching of the Christ'."³⁴

"The word *transgresseth* is a very interesting word. In the Greek it is *proago*. *Ago* means 'to go'; *pro* means 'before.' *Proago* means 'to go before or to go ahead.' Therefore, the meaning here is not so much to transgress as to go farther than is right."³⁵

John's use of "abide" indicates that he spoke of a vital personal relationship with God that comes with adherence to the truth, not just dead doctrinal orthodoxy (cf. John 8:31; 14:21-23; 15:1-7).

The teaching "of Christ" could be the teaching that Christ gave (subjective genitive), "the standard of Christian teaching,"³⁶ or the teaching about Christ (objective genitive). Perhaps John meant both things.

vv. 10-11

In the culture of John's day philosophers and teachers relied on the people to whom they spoke for lodging and financial assistance (e.g., Acts 18:2-3; 21:7). John instructed his readers to refuse to help the false teachers in these ways. Beyond this they were not even to give verbal encouragement to these apostates (cf. Acts 15:24; 23:2-6; 1 Cor. 10:20; 1 Tim. 5:22; James 1:21; 1 Pet. 3:13).³⁷ John did not advocate the persecution of heretics here, but he strongly counseled his readers to give them no aid or encouragement in their destructive ministry.³⁸

"This is a severe measure, particularly when one remembers that hospitality is generally enjoined in the NT [and especially also in 3 John]."³⁹

I believe John would have approved his readers' efforts to correct the false teachers in private and to lead them into a true appreciation of the person and work of Christ (cf. Acts 18:26). In dealing with such persons ourselves we must also relate to their ministry in one way and to themselves in another. We must not approve or encourage their work but must show concern for their personal relationship with Christ.⁴⁰

³⁴David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:202-3.

³⁵McGee, 5:832.

³⁶Robertson, 6:254.

³⁷Cf. Brooke, p. 179.

³⁸Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, p. 351.

³⁹Ryrie, p. 1481. See Findlay, pp. 13-20, for discussion of hospitality in the early church.

⁴⁰See Hodges, "2 John," pp. 908-9.

"Admittedly great care should be exercised before applying such a radical withholding of hospitality from anyone. For the elder it was applied only to antichristians who were committed to destroying the faith of the community. The issue involved more than disagreements in interpretation or personal misunderstandings among members of the body of Christ. It was radical and clearly defined unbelief, and it involved active and aggressive promotion of perversions of truth and practice that struck at the heart of Christianity.

"The responsibility of parents may furnish an analogy. Parents must discriminate as to whom even among their relatives they entertain in their home. Some relatives might be of such questionable character as to menace the moral, spiritual, and physical welfare of the children. Such relatives must be excluded. Parents must balance their concern for their relatives with their responsibility for their children. Notice that John does not suggest that the elect lady and her children deal with the false teachers in hatred or retaliate against them. Instead, he counsels that the false teachers be kept at a distance lest their heresy destroy the young church."⁴¹

III. CONCLUSION VV. 12-13

John expressed his desire to visit his readers personally to explain the reason for the brevity of this epistle.

- v. 12 John had more to say on this subject that God did not lead him to record in this letter. He could have written this epistle on one standard size sheet of papyrus.⁴² We do not know if John was able to follow through with his desire to visit his readers soon.

"It is easy to lay down general principles, but their application to particular cases is a delicate task, demanding knowledge, sympathy, charity."⁴³

His readers' joy would be full when they understood the issue presented here more fully as well as when John visited them (cf. 1 John 1:4).

- v. 13 John evidently meant that the Christians in the sister church of which he was a member sent their greetings along with his own to his readers.

⁴¹Barker, pp. 365-66. Cf. Marshall, p. 75.

⁴²Smalley, p. 314.

⁴³Smith, 5:204

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