

# Notes on 2 John

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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

## 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 have described 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."<sup>1</sup>

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). 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 word translated "lady," v. 1). 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). This view harmonizes with the personification of the church as Christ's bride (Eph. 5:22-23; 2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7). Since John's arena of ministry was Asia Minor the probability of this being a church in that Roman province is good.

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.

### MESSAGE<sup>2</sup>

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

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<sup>1</sup>I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 9.

<sup>2</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:176-193.

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. 1).
2. He based the love of all Christians on it (v. 1).
3. He based his writing of this epistle on it (v. 2).
4. He based the three great Christian graces on it (v. 3).
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 through His apostles following His ascension (the New Testament; 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. This is not intellectual assent to orthodoxy but a vital relationship in which God controls us. Our 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.

John 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 it 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 they had really 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.

Watch out for appeals to follow teaching that deviates from Scripture. Watch out for appeals that claim a more advanced knowledge of the truth.

We need to 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 have said, "It matters very much what we believe because that will determine if we really love each other." Abiding in the truth is essential to maintain brotherly love.

### **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.<sup>3</sup>

- 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).

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<sup>3</sup>Roy Clements, Eden Baptist Church, Cambridge, England, July 19, 1992.

## 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 I 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. 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."<sup>4</sup>

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.

"The Truth makes true love possible."<sup>5</sup>

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. "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."<sup>6</sup>

These qualities flourish where truth and love prevail.

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<sup>4</sup>F. 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.

<sup>5</sup>B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, p. 225.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*

"Where 'truth and love' coexist harmoniously, we have a well-balanced Christian character (cf. Eph. 4.15)."<sup>7</sup>

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."<sup>8</sup>

### **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).
- 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."<sup>9</sup>

- 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 [*sic*] in detail every separate expression of the will of God."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Bruce, p. 139.

<sup>8</sup>Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 322. Cf. John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, p. 205.

<sup>9</sup>Glenn W. Barker, "2 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 363.

<sup>10</sup>Westcott, p. 228.

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.

"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)."<sup>11</sup>

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

"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 possibility of fellowship, and the chief means by which it is brought about."<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Smalley, p. 327.

<sup>12</sup>A. E. Brooke, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, p. 175.

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.'"<sup>13</sup>

v. 8 Compromise with the false teachers could lead to a loss of reward (cf. the warning passages in Hebrews).<sup>14</sup> 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).<sup>15</sup> Loss of salvation is not in view at all.

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 in an infantile intellectual condition. However, John regarded that "infantile" position as proper for the Christian. 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).

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).

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 15:23; 23:26; 1 Cor. 10:20; 1 Tim. 5:22; James 1:1; 1 Pet. 4:13).<sup>16</sup> John did not advocate the persecution of heretics here, but he strongly counselled his readers to give them no aid or encouragement in their destructive ministry. I believe he 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. In dealing with such persons ourselves we must also relate to their ministry

<sup>13</sup>Marshall, p. 71.

<sup>14</sup>Barker, pp. 364-65; Marshall, p. 72.

<sup>15</sup>See Zane C. Hodges, "2 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 907.

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Brooke, p. 179.

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.<sup>17</sup>

"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."<sup>18</sup>

### **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. John could have written this epistle on one standard size sheet of papyrus.<sup>19</sup> We do not know if John was able to follow through with his desire to visit his readers soon.

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.

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<sup>17</sup>See Hodges, pp. 908-9.

<sup>18</sup>Barker, pp. 365-66. Cf. Marshall, p. 75.

<sup>19</sup>Smalley, p. 314.

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