

An Introduction to John's Second Letter

"TRUTH AND LOVE"

Unlike I John, that is in the form of a treatise, II and III John look very much like a typical first century letter in structure. The writer is identified, as also the recipients; there is a greeting, an exhortation, and a final greeting. It is the smallest book in the Bible (in verses, not words).

I. Salutation, vv. 1-3

The major introductory problem with the book is the identity of the author ("the elder") and recipients of the book ("to [the] elect lady and her children"). How are these to be understood?

A. The author, v. 1a

1. "The elder," does it refer to age and maturity or to a church officer since the earliest churches were led by a plurality of leaders called elders? Since the article ("the") appears before "elder," and we have no record of a single leader over a church in the New Testament, it seems best to take it as an age or maturity category. From the unspecified identity of the author, we can deduce that they church knew him well.

Further, we can link I John and the two small letters as follows:

- a. All three writing allude to a schismatic element in the church to which he is writing (I John 2:19, II John v. 7, III John vv. 9-11).
- b. I John and II John mention the presence of "antichrist figures" (2:18, v. 7).
- c. The error in both writings concerns the person of Christ. The false teachers deny the incarnation of Christ, understanding that Jesus is not the Christ, but a mere teacher of moral virtues.
- d. Several words are often found in all three letters: "truth," "love," "joy," and a "new commandment."
- e. Finally, there is the recognized habit in John not to reveal his identity ("the apostle that leaned on Jesus" [13:23-24]).

B. The recipients, v. 1b

"Elect lady ("chosen lady")," does it refer to a literal woman (translated "lady Electa") and her family or is the phrase to be taken as a metaphor?

- a. If you take the phrase as a literal woman, then she has a sister ("Sister Electa") of the same name (v.13). That seems highly unlikely.
- b. The word "elect" or "chosen" is an adjective, not a noun. The rendering would be something like "Dear Lady."
- c. The difficulty of identifying the reference as a literal lady is that the pronouns, "you," are plural (vv. 6, 8 10, 12)
- d. It does not seem likely that a personal command to love (that is, to love a particular family) was from "the beginning" (v. 5).

- e. The personification of cities or countries in female form was an established literary convention in Bible times. The Corinthian Church is referred as a “bride betrothed to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2)”. Peter speaks of the “church in Babylon (read Rome) as a “she (1Pet. 5:13)”. Israel is called the “daughter of Zion” in the Prophets. The church universal is called a bride (Rev.20: 2, 9). English coins to this day have the Roman designation “Britannia”.
- f. “Her children,” assuming that “Electa” is a figure of speech, refers to the members of the church and the letter ends with a greeting from members of another church (v.13).

In summary, it seems best to say that what we have here is a first century letter written by a well-recognized figure in the earliest churches, written from the city where he is residing in a house-church to another house-church. According to tradition, the apostle John is writing from Asia Minor (Ephesus?) to a nearby church (an example of this would be his writing to the seven churches of the Revelation). Though the author specified, the commonality of themes and phrases with 1 John has caused our scholars to universally attribute it to the Apostle John.

C. The context, v. 1c-2

1. Identified, v.1c

While the recipients of the letter are not specifically identified, they are people who embrace the truth. “The truth “is the teaching embodied in Jesus (heavenly origin, deity) “The lady and her children” are a metaphorical way of saying the church and her members. The ground of fellowship as Christians is truth, the biblical gospel; the expression of truth is love! See also v. 13, “the sister and her children.”

2. Reasoned, v. 2

a) The presence of truth, v. 2a

It is not uncommon that what is said in one place of the Spirit it is said of Christ. It is by the Spirit who is truth (1 John 5:17) that Christ abides or indwells us. “Abiding” is not a temporal state; it is a permanent state! It is not the privilege of the insightful; all Christians know the truth about Jesus!

b) The endurance of truth, v. 2b

Here the apostle states the believer’s security. Christ by the spirit will be the believer’s possession forever! Again, “abiding” is a permanent state; it cannot be lost!!

3. The greeting, v. 3

The greeting is a typical first century letters. Paul uses it in both letters to Timothy as does Jude. Some have seen in the trilogy (grace, mercy, and peace) the order of salvation. It begins in grace, unmerited favor, and mercy (the only occurrence in John’s writings), the response to the human condition, leading to peace. It begins in God and ends in the benefit of mankind. It comes to us from God the Father through Jesus, His son.

The phrase, “Son of the Father,” is unique to John; it is an affirmation of our Lord’s deity.

The phrase, “in truth and love,” is worth our pause. One preposition (“in”) governs two nouns linking them together. Truth and love are inseparable. To know the truth is to act according; God is both truth and love! Conformity to truth always leads to the expression of love.

II. Occasion, v. 4

The tense of the verb, “rejoiced,” looks at the inception of an action. When John heard of the godliness of this group of people he was delighted. “Walking in truth” means conduct characterized by sincerity. The “some” likely does not imply that a group in the church was walking unfaithfully; it is more likely that John simply met some from the church that he encountered. Further, the context of the “some” is positive and should not be interpreted as a negative. Since John was impressed with those he met, he wanted contact with all of them.

III. Exhortation, vv. 5-11

A. The command stated, v. 5

The command is to continue in what they have understood from their inception of the gospel message that God wants of us. While “love” is not in the imperative mood, it is identified as a commandment. The “you” is singular meaning that John is writing to the church, the collectivity of one. “Love” and “walking in the truth” are interconnected.

“From the beginning” is most likely referring to the initial hearing of the gospel.

B. The command elaborated, v. 6

The essence of love expressed is obedience (1 John 5:3). Obedience should characterize our lives. Love means living according to God’s commands. For John, “love” and “obedience” are synonyms.

It is interesting that John speaks of commandments (plural) and then immediately states it in the singular (commandment). That is, the commandments can be reduced to one, love, as Jesus taught us (Matt. 22:37-40).

C. The command reasoned, vv. 7-9

1. The fact of false teachers, v. 7

“For” indicates a reason or a necessitated consequence. While the danger posed by false, itinerant teachers is theological error, it is manifested in a lack of love. The “many deceivers” are those itinerants, those Diotrephes opposed but inappropriately, who seek to divide the church.

“Who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh” speaks of the successionists’ error. They embraced Jesus (the man), but not Jesus Christ (the savior and God’s anointed one).

While they taught that Jesus was a supreme moralist, they denied the reality of the incarnation and, thus, the uniqueness of His person, conceived only as person of higher moral accomplishment and thus a model to emulate.

John is using the term, “antichrist,” in a metaphorical sense; that is, as one who opposes Christ. The “deceivers” are so-called because they prefigure or anticipate the one who is to come who will deceive the world. Such traffic in distortion and lies, the opposite of care and love.

2. The danger of false teachers, v. 8

Having warned them of the threat of false teachers, he here expresses the danger of them (it is the only imperative in the letter and the purpose of John in writing it). What will a believer lose through entanglement in error? What will they forfeit of what they have accrued? The answer is the reward of a life lived in obedience. The same idea is expressed by Paul in 1 Cor. 3:8, 14 and John in Rev. 22: 12. The reward appears to be the fullness of blessing possessed in this life through obedience, the joy, harmony, and peace of our salvation. It is certainly not salvation itself.

-The context is not about the possibility of the loss of salvation. It is the danger of listening to falsity.

-John has assured them that they are of the truth (v. 1).

-That this “truth” abides in them forever (v. 2).

-The words “watch” and “you” are plural meaning he is speaking of the church. It is a warning to beware of the danger of “antichrists.”

-That the Holy Spirit, the expression of God’s presence, is a gift to all believers (1 John 3:24, 4:13, 5:7).

3. The error of false teachers, v. 9

The “anyone” is not in reference to believers, but to false teachers. It seems that these schismatics were at one time outward professors of Christ, but they did not remain so; they discovered something “better.” “They went out from us for they were not of us...” (1 John 2:19). They did what true believers cannot do; they failed to continue (“abide”).

“The teaching of Christ” mostly likely refers to the teachings concerning or about Christ by the apostles. This fits the context of the letter since it is about what the apostle taught them (“Truth and Love”).

If one rejects the apostle’s teaching about Jesus, they have no valid claim to knowing the Father (“... He has explained Him” [John 1:18]). No one can know God unless it has been revealed to them through the ministry of the Holy Spirit! To deny Christ is to reject the Father, the two are inseparable (1 John 2:23).

D. The conduct enjoined, vv. 10-11

1. Stated, v. 10

False teachers are not to be given an audience before the assembled church (this is not about personal contact). Hospitality is not to be shown to them. In the ancient world, public inns were notorious places and since the early church depended on itinerate teachers, hospitality was a necessity (Demetris).

Does “house” refer to the church-gathering or individual homes of believers? The most persuasive argument against a reference to the former is that the gender is feminine (When the NT refers to the church it is in the masculine; however, John does not use the term “church” in any of his writings). That said, in the context of the letter it seems best to take it as a reference to a church-gathering.

- The reference to “chosen lady (v. 1)” and “the children of your chosen sister (v. 13)” refer to churches it would make sense here. The subject is the gathering of believers who receive instruction as a group, not an individual.
- The warning in the letter is about itinerants who come with a false gospel.
- That is, all three of John’s letter were written to churches (“They went out from us... (I John 2:19).

2. Reasoned, v.11

“Greet” implies support for ministry; in this setting, it is to condone and express sanction. Ecclesiastical fellowship is not to be extended to those who deny the gospel (that is, those who profess Christian faith and teach their erroneous variety of it). *The issue is not a warrant to be unkind or to totally shun. Remember the context concerns falsity entering the assembly of saints through itineracy.*

IV. Personal Note, v.12

We do not know what else John wanted to say to this congregation. Perhaps a clue is the elaboration of many themes in 1 John. What we can deduce from the verse that false teaching promotes disharmony and diminishes joy in a fellowship (“that” looks at a goal or purpose). John alludes to this in v. 8.

IV. Final Greeting, v.13

As in v. 1, “chosen lady and her children,” “sister and her children” is most likely a figure of speech, a metaphor, for the church and its constituents from which John wrote the letter. An example of this may be found in I Peter 5:13 (“she who is in Babylon, chosen together with you”); Babylon is a metaphor for a wicked place (in this case, Rome).

Applications:

1. Truth and love are the two great virtues. Truth without love can lead to cruelty, love without truth to permissiveness. In God, there is truth and love (v. 3) in perfect congruity. It seems that in our general culture truth is diminishing, love with it, and in the churches, there are sad similarities!
2. When people act commendably, it is good to commend them (v. 4).
3. As truth and love are an unbreakable unity, so is obedience and love. Obedience is the manifestation of love (v.6). Love, truth, and obedience are a unity
4. Love means a concern that emanates from the heart and expressed in concern for others. It is the summation of all the commandments, the Bible as a whole.
5. Listening to false teachers can have a detrimental impact depriving one of the fullness and richness that comes through obedience to the truth (v.8). Error causes unrest and dissension often bring out the worst side of all of us.

6. False teachers, deceivers, do not come to us with a badge or sign saying, “This is bad; this will harm you.” They come wrapped in pleasant circumstances, enticing words, and alluring promises that there is another way, a better, truer way. It comes structured around teachings that flatter natural instincts and interests; it questions things once received by others through suspicion that there are better options than those they portray as intolerant and narrow-minded. The only command in our text is “watch.” Are you watching? “If it is too good to be true, it likely is not” sounds like something from the Book of Proverbs!”
7. We are neither to officially sanction nor help those who are opposed to the doctrines of Christ (v. 10). *Remember, the content is in the life of the church.*
8. To deny the Son is not to have the Father. There is no sense of a true faith in God that does not embrace the truth concerning the Lord Jesus.
9. The secular media and our liberal churches suggest that love, meaning acceptance of the legitimacy of individual choices, even if they contradict the Bible, are worthy of toleration (we are not talking about behavior that is neither proscribed nor prohibited in the Scripture). That is the world of pragmatism and anarchy. In a way, the media is correct. However, the problem with their definition of love is their definition of love because there is no transcendent anchor to define it. Love is individualized potential for self-advancement, pleasure, and entertainment. The secular poet, the spinner of lyrics and melodies, corporate America in the quest for economics, simply operate from a horizontal definition of the term. They have the right term, but not the correct meaning!!! Why? Because it is disjointed from “Truth,” or at least it as redefined, has become merely tolerable options. I believe the gospel churches are failing, many from the pulpit and in the instruction of our children in the Bible (the churches are increasingly teaching morals without biblical foundations, so it is religious socialization). *In the past, our forebearers called it catechesis.*