

INTRODUCTION TO 2 & 3 JOHN AND 2 JOHN

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I. Introduction to 2 & 3 John

A. The author of 2 & 3 John refers to himself only as "the elder," but there are good reasons for thinking he is the Apostle John.

1. The starting place for inferring that "the elder" is the Apostle John is that the author of the Gospel of John was almost certainly the Apostle John. I don't want to take the time to go through the evidence for that, so let me just quote from *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (p. 253), written by two highly regarded New Testament scholars, D. A. Carson and Douglas Moo: "In short, the most straightforward reading of the evidence is still the traditional one: it is highly probable that John the son of Zebedee wrote the fourth gospel."

2. Second, it seems clear that 1 John was written by the same person who wrote the Gospel of John. This is indicated by similarities in the Greek style and vocabulary; the conceptual parallels between the two involving things like light, darkness, life, truth, world, and word; and the use in each of many identical or nearly identical clauses and phrases. And the fact he describes himself as an eyewitness of Jesus fits with his being an apostle. So it is not surprising that early church tradition is unanimous in attributing 1 John to the Apostle John.

3. The third piece of the puzzle is that 2 John clearly seems to have been written by the same person who wrote 1 John. The author of 2 John deals with the same historical situation reflected in 1 John, and as in 1 John, he labels the false teachers "antichrist(s)," the only times that specific term is used in the New Testament, stresses the importance of the love command, and refers to the joy of fellowship in the truth.

4. Third John clearly is written by the same person who wrote 2 John. There are stylistic similarities, the repetition of his joy over children walking in the truth, and the fact the author is identified as "the elder" in both. All of that adds up to the Apostle John being the author of the Gospel of John and the three letters.

5. Why he calls himself "the elder" in 2 & 3 John but not elsewhere is unclear, but that fact does not overturn the conclusion of common authorship. Perhaps John came to be known in some quarters as *the* elder to indicate his distinction as the last remaining apostle and that title would not have been appropriate for the Gospel or 1 John because those writings had a different or broader initial audience.

B. To fully appreciate 2 & 3 John, one must have some idea of the occasion and content of 1 John because 2 & 3 John, especially 2 John, clearly relate to that same historical situation. So let me say a word about 1 John.

1. 1 John was probably written from Ephesus in the early 90s. It was a response to a crisis in the church caused by the rise and influence of certain false teachers. John refers to

these false teachers as antichrists (2:18, 4:3, 2 Jn. 7), as liars (2:4, 22, 4:20), as false prophets (4:1), as being of the world (4:5), and as those who would lead them astray (2:26, 3:7; deceivers in 2 Jn. 7).

2. These false teachers had arisen from within the church. They started out as orthodox believers but went beyond apostolic doctrine into heresy. Paul's prophecy to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30 and to Timothy in 2 Tim. 4:3-4 was coming true: "savage wolves" were arising from within the church and ripping the flock.

3. The false doctrine seems to have centered in two areas: the nature of Christ (Christology) and Christian behavior (ethics). These teachers in some sense denied the incarnation, the truth that the eternal Christ, the Son of God, actually became flesh, became a human being, and they were morally indifferent. They walked in darkness, did not keep God's commandments, did not walk as Jesus did, did not practice righteousness, etc.

4. By the time of 1 John these false teachers and their followers had actually separated or seceded from the faithful churches (see 1 Jn. 2:19), the churches that were abiding in the truth of John's gospel. The false teachers saw themselves as more enlightened than the faithful. In their minds, they had "transcended" the gospel; they had gone beyond what they had been taught and gained a deeper knowledge than what they thought was possessed by the faithful. You see hints of this in 1 Jn. 2:20-21 where John assures the faithful that they have knowledge and know the truth and in 2:27 where he tells them that they do not need anyone to teach them (contrary to what the false teachers were claiming).

5. Having separated from the faithful Christians, the false teachers and their followers showed little, if any, brotherly love toward them. That is why there is such an emphasis in 1 John on brotherly love. In failing to love those who were abiding in the apostolic message, abiding in John's gospel, those who boasted about their spirituality, insight, and relationship with God revealed the truth of their condition.

6. Though the false teachers had separated from the faithful, some of them still traveled among the churches trying to recruit Christians to their heretical teaching. It is clear from 1 Jn. 2:26, 3:7, and 4:1 that they were actively trying to deceive those to whom John is writing. That's why he urges his readers in 2:24 to hold onto what they heard from the beginning and urges them in 4:1 to test the spirits to see whether they are from God.

7. All of this apparently was making some of the faithful insecure about their salvation, worried that they may have missed the boat. So John in a number of places assures them of their standing with God. They have Christ as their advocate (2:1-2), they are forgiven (2:12), they know the Father (2:13), they have overcome the evil one (2:13), they know the truth (2:21), they are God's children (3:2), they have eternal life (5:13), etc.

II. 2 John

A. 2 Jn. 1-3: *The elder, to an elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I but all who have come to know the truth, ²because of the truth that lives in us and will be with us forever. ³With us there will be grace, mercy, and peace from God [the] Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in truth and love.*

1. "The elder" is not simply a reference to John's advanced age. The phrase carries with it a sense of leadership and authority. It was used of religious leaders in both Israel and the church.

2. He is writing to an elect lady and her children, which is almost certainly a metaphorical reference to a local church, a local congregation, and its members. John is in one local church, as indicated by v. 13 where the children of this lady's elect sister send greetings, and is writing to those in another church.

3. Christian communities are "elect" or "chosen" in that Christians have been chosen by God to receive rich eternal blessings. God determined from eternity that those of faith would spend eternity with him in glory.

4. John notes that he "loves in truth" the Christians to whom he is writing. This probably does not mean simply that he truly or sincerely loves them, though that is no doubt the case. Rather, it means he loves them as sharers in the truth of Christ, as those who continue in the faith that binds them together, and he relates to them in accordance with the demands of that truth. Christians are a community of love, people who have a commitment to each other and a bond is like that of physical family, which is why he adds that they also are loved by *all* who have come to know the truth of Christ. There is a spiritual bond between all of God's children; we are a brotherhood, a fellowship, a spiritual family.

5. John elaborates that the love shared by the saints is a product of the truth that lives in us. It is our identity as Christians, those who have received in our hearts the gospel of Christ and in our conversion been indwelt by his Holy Spirit, that generates the bond or connection with all other Christians.

6. And this truth of Jesus Christ will be with us forever. It will determine our eternal destiny, which will be a state in which Jesus, the subject of that truth, will be forever praised. And in that state, we as Christians will enjoy forever the fruit and blessings of the grace, mercy, and peace poured out on us from God the Father and Jesus Christ. This note of reassurance may be a counter to the insecurity the false teachers are known to generate.

7. John adds that this grace, mercy, and peace will be "in truth and love." With Colin Kruse, I think he means it will be for those who abide in the apostolic faith, who are not deceived into a rejection of that faith, and who as a consequence of that faith are bound to all other Christians in love.

B. 2 Jn. 4-6: *I rejoiced greatly because I have found some of your children walking in the truth, just as we received a command from the Father. ⁵And now I ask you, dear lady, not as though writing you a new command but one which we had from the beginning, let us love one*

another. ⁶And this is love, that we walk according to his commands. This is the command, as you heard from the beginning, that you walk in it.

1. John had somehow learned that some of the Christians in the congregation to which he was writing were "walking in the truth," meaning they were living in light of the truth, living consistently with the truth that Jesus is Lord. (This need not imply that others were not; it simply may be that John only had information on some.) As we would say, they were "walking the walk" not just "talking the talk," and for that John rejoiced greatly.

2. John says the faithful, obedient living of these particular saints is in accord with a command that John and his fellow Christians had received from the Father, a command that has been in place from the beginning, from the very foundation of Christianity. And the command is that they love one another or, as he phrases it at the end of v. 6, that they "*walk* in it [love]." The command is to *live lives* of love, to love in *actions* not simply in words.

3. As John makes clear in v. 6, the single command to love involves a multitude of duties. Love is an umbrella command. He says that love requires us to walk according to his *commands* (plural). So we are commanded to love, which brings into play an array of other commands about how we treat and relate to one another (see 1 Jn. 3:23-24).

a. As I have stated on numerous occasions, the fundamental ethical requirement for the Christian is love (e.g., Mat. 22:37-40), but some specific conduct is loving and other conduct is not. Love is the center, but there are definite requirements on how it expresses itself. Love is not a subjective emotion, warm feelings, but a sacrificial commitment to another's welfare that is reflected in one's conduct toward another.

b. As Paul indicates in Rom. 13:8-10, the command to love your neighbor as yourself encompasses the commands of the law not to commit adultery, not to murder, not to steal, and not to covet (and other commands he does not specify). So the Christian, though not being under the Mosaic law, that set of commands that are part of Mosaic covenant, upholds the transcendent moral requirements that are included in that law. It is this ongoing moral law centered in love that is the "law of Christ" (1 Cor. 9:21; Gal. 6:2 with 5:14); it is love specified, love with objective content.

C. 2 Jn. 7-11: *For many deceivers have gone out into the world, who do not confess Jesus Christ coming in the flesh; this one is the deceiver and the antichrist.* ⁸*Watch yourselves, so that you not lose the things for which we worked but receive a full reward.* ⁹*Everyone who goes ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God. The one who continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son.* ¹⁰*If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into a house and do not say to him, "Greetings."* ¹¹*For the one who says to him, "Greetings," shares in his evil works.*

1. John's rejoicing over these brothers who are living faithfully was especially great because ("For") the false teachers were out and about and threatening faithful living by undermining the truth that Jesus came in the flesh.

a. The way that apparently worked was that the false teachers' denial of Jesus having come in the flesh was tied up with a radical dualism that regarded the spiritual, the nonphysical, as divine, good, and eternal and the material, the physical, as created, evil, and temporary. No lasting union was possible between them, so a real incarnation of God in human flesh was impossible. It only could be either apparent (i.e., Christ *seemed* to be a human but really was not, as was claimed in that branch of Gnosticism known as Docetism) or temporary (i.e., the spirit temporarily inhabited, not became, the flesh, as was claimed by a heretic named Cerinthus).

b. In addition to leading to a denial of the incarnation, this exaltation of the spiritual and denigration of the material made liberation of the spirit through knowledge the only important thing. It is a short step from this to the claim that how one behaved when in the evil material state, especially after the liberation of one's spirit through enlightenment, was spiritually trivial or irrelevant. It simply did not matter; what one did with one's body was of no consequence. As Johannine scholar Gary Burge notes regarding the full-blown Gnosticism of the second century ("John, Letter of" in *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*, 592):

Believers were "reborn," creating a unique union with God that literally brought about a state of sinless perfection. 'Sin' belongs to another nature, our material nature, which no longer matters in God's economy. Hence, enlightened spiritual experiences validated spirituality, while at the same time practical questions of moral conduct were deemed irrelevant.

2. John labels those who deny the reality of the incarnation, who deny that in Jesus the divine actually became a human being, as deceivers and antichrists. They are opposed to God and his work in Christ and thus share the spirit of the end-time Antichrist; they are cut from the same cloth.

3. He warns the Christians not to fall for what the deceivers are selling because in doing so they will forfeit the eternal reward for which he and they had labored, the implication being that they will instead reap spiritual destruction.

a. That is the level of error we are talking about here. This cannot be applied properly to every difference in understanding of Scripture, but it can be applied to false teaching that destroys one's salvation.

b. And in light of Paul's statement in 1 Cor. 6:9-10 about not inheriting the kingdom of God and the severe condemnation of homosexual conduct elsewhere in Scripture, as we saw over the last couple of months, I submit to you that any who deny the sinfulness of that conduct fall in that category. They are leading the sheep to slaughter.

4. He says in v. 9 that those who go beyond the bounds of orthodoxy, the truth of the gospel, do not have God, referring specifically here to the false teachers who now denied the incarnation and the importance of moral living, but the principle is broader. They are lost; without God and without hope. But those who hold fast to the apostolic doctrine, who do not

deny its essentials or fundamentals, have the Father and the Son and all the blessings that go with that.

5. John then commands them in vv. 10-11 not to receive anyone who does not bring the apostolic teaching of Christ.

a. He is not talking about non-Christians or those who have no teaching ministry; he is referring again to the false teachers who in some way deny the incarnation, and with that the need for moral living, and who are bent on spreading that heresy, "enlightening" the church.

b. They must not aid and abet such false teachers in their work by welcoming them into their homes (or the house church) or greet them so as to imply they are in good Christian standing. They are not in good standing, and receiving them as though they are enhances their position and their access to God's people and thus increases their ability to prey on them. By doing that one shares in the heretic's wicked works. We cannot give such people a platform or indicate to the church that they are acceptable.

6. Given the spiritual threat posed today by those who claim that homosexual conduct is not sinful, Christians have no business welcoming or promoting those who teach this error. These false teachers need to be rejected by the community of faith or their teaching will spread like gangrene. However this principle may have been misapplied by individuals and churches in the past, we cannot allow the fear of becoming overly zealous "heresy hunters" to paralyze us into inaction so that we aid those who teach damning doctrines.

7. This ties in with the instruction to elders in Tit. 1:9: *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.* Shepherds must know Christian doctrine and hold to it firmly so that he can teach it to the flock and rebuke those who threaten the flock with false doctrine. In these days, long after completion of the canon, we might say that an elder must be "a man of the Book."

D. 2 Jn. 12-13: *Although I have many things to write to you, I do not desire [to communicate] through paper and ink. Rather, I hope to come to you and to speak face to face so that our joy may be complete. ¹³The children of your elect sister greet you.*

1. The expression of a desire to be present with the recipient is common in friendly letters in the first-century Mediterranean world. John employs that tradition, but he is not doubt sincere.

2. He wants to be with them personally so their mutual joy may be complete. John assumes (or is perhaps hopeful) they will be glad to have him, and for his part he is probably anticipating the joy of seeing more of the saints there who are walking in the truth and being able to further fortify them in the faith.

3. At the very end, he conveys to the Christians in the church to which he is writing the greetings from those in the congregation from which he is writing. There is a bond between the saints.