

INTRODUCTION AND 2 & 3 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. ⁸Watch yourselves, so that you not lose the things for which we worked but receive a full reward. ⁹Everyone 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. ¹⁰If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into a house and do not say to him, "Greetings." ¹¹For 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.

III. 3 John

A. 3 Jn. 1

The elder, to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

1. 3 John is written by the Apostle John to a dear friend of his named Gaius. Gaius was a common name in the Greco-Roman world. Reference is made elsewhere in the New Testament to a Gaius who was a Macedonian (Acts 19:29), a Gaius from the town of Derbe (Acts 20:4), and a Gaius who lived in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14; Rom. 16:23). There is no way to know if the Gaius to whom John wrote was one of those mentioned elsewhere.

2. John loves him "in truth," meaning as one who continues in the truth of Jesus Christ as preached from the beginning. Gaius is holding firm to the apostolic doctrine and living accordingly.

B. 3 Jn. 2-4

Beloved, I pray that you may get along well in everything and be in good health, just as your soul is getting along well. ³For I rejoiced greatly at the coming of the brothers and their testifying to your truth, [namely] how you are walking in the truth. ⁴I do not have greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

1. John's affection for Gaius is emphasized by his again referring to him as "beloved" (and yet again in vv. 5 and 11). He prays for God's blessings in Gaius's life generally, in everything, and for Gaius's physical health. We readily pray such prayers for those we love, those to whom we feel especially close. We ask God to protect them, to bring good things into their lives, and to see them through all circumstances in a way that strengthens and blesses them.

2. He acknowledges Gaius's faithfulness and spiritual health by saying he's praying that his circumstances and *physical* health may go as well as his spiritual life is going. And then he immediately explains how he knows that Gaius is doing so well spiritually. He knows because some brothers had visited him and had testified to the truth about Gaius, which is that he is "walking in the truth."

3. As I said last week, "walking in the truth" meaning living in the light of the truth that Jesus is Lord. Gaius is abiding in the gospel of Christ and living the implications of that faith, living consistently with the truth he professes. In Paul's words in Phil. 1:27, Gaius was conducting himself in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ.

4. John says he rejoiced *greatly* over this news. It was no doubt especially sweet to hear because of the threats to faith that were circulating in John's area. Then as now there are forces at work to pull believers from the truth, to lure them into abandoning what they once believed, so it is such a great thing to hear that a beloved brother or sister from your past is still "keepin' on keepin' on."

5. And that joy is multiplied when it is someone you have had a hand in leading to Christ or with whom you have some special relationship in terms of their spiritual welfare, someone you relate to as your spiritual child. John says he has no greater joy than to receive this kind of news. Implicit in this is John's desire for Gaius to continue to give him joy by continuing to walk in the truth regarding the request he is about to make.

C. 3 Jn. 5-8

Beloved, you act faithfully in whatever you do for the brothers, even though they are strangers. ⁶They testified to your love before the church. You will

do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. ⁷For they went out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the pagans. ⁸Therefore, we ought to support such men so that we may be co-workers in the truth.

1. John praises Gaius for having on previous occasions shown hospitality to missionaries from John's community. Even though they were strangers, people unknown to Gaius, he took them in.

a. In the ancient Mediterranean world, extending hospitality involved not only providing food and housing but also becoming a guarantor of the visitors to the rest of the community. By receiving them as your guests you vouched for them to the community, so there was a significant risk to one's own standing and reputation. That is why letters of recommendation were so important.

b. This kind of hospitality was crucial in the spread of the gospel. Inns were unpleasant and dangerous places to stay, so Christians depended on the hospitality of fellow Christians as they went about preaching the gospel.

2. The prior recipients of Gaius's hospitality had testified to it "before the church," which may suggest it was done during a congregational assembly. And note that the act of showing hospitality to the missionaries is described as Gaius's "love." In doing this for them he had loved them, he had risked and sacrificed for their welfare and blessing.

3. At v. 6b the focus shifts from praising Gaius for the past hospitality he had shown to the brothers to requesting that he continue in that same vein by showing hospitality to the stranger Demetrius (and whoever else accompanied him) who had now arrived at his place with this letter. This shift in focus is marked by the change to the future tense ("You *will do well* to send them on their way").

4. The expression "to send them on their way" uses a verb that functioned as a technical term for missionary support in the early church (Acts 15:3; Rom. 15:24; 1 Cor. 16:6, 11; 2 Cor. 1:16; and Tit. 3:13). John requests that he do so ("you will do well" often served as an idiom that meant something comparable to our "please") in "a manner worthy of God." This means in a way that God would approve, a way that respects and validates the dedication of these brothers to the cause of Christ.

5. He explains in v. 7 that they should be supported that way because they went out for the sake of the Lord Jesus Christ, to preach his name, the truth of who he is, and to bring people to faith. In doing so, they had no help from pagans, non-Christians, and thus were completely dependent on the Christian community, people like Gaius, for hospitality. John is describing who these brothers are who have arrived at Gaius's door.

6. Given the greatness of the work in which these men are engaging, John says in v. 9 that we as Christians ought to support them, provide the necessary hospitality for them, so that we may be co-workers with them in the truth of Christ. Just as providing hospitality to a

heretic makes one a sharer in his wicked work (2 Jn. 11), so providing hospitality to faithful missionaries makes one a sharer in his glorious work. As Christians, we ought to get in on this Christ-honoring work.

D. 3 Jn. 9-10

I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be the boss among them, does not pay attention to us. ¹⁰So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, spreading evil words against us. And not being content with those things, he also does not welcome the brothers and forbids those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

1. John had written earlier to a church near the Christian community to which Gaius belonged. In that congregation was a man named Diotrephes who apparently had some sort of leadership role in the group. He rejected John's authority, refusing to pay attention to what John had written. Perhaps he was a casualty of the theological confusion being sown by the false teachers, but the reason for his rejection of John's authority is not specified.

2. And to make matters worse, when missionaries from John's community sought hospitality in Diotrephes's congregation, Diotrephes treated them like heretics! The fact they no doubt were accompanied by an introductory letter similar to 3 John did not matter because Diotrephes did not accept John as a reliable source of testimony.

3. Diotrephes not only refused to welcome the missionaries himself, but he forbid anyone else from doing so and even put out of the church those who *wanted* to do so, presumably by claiming they were thereby offering support to heresy. So it looks like Diotrephes was doing to the true and faithful Christians what John had instructed the Christians in 2 John to do to heretics.

4. But this is not a case of what is good for the goose is good for the gander, a situation in which every claim is as good or as valid as another. There is a truth, and the fact of the matter is that John is standing with God and Diotrephes is not. So John is a courageous champion of truth, whereas Diotrephes is an arrogant or confused churchman with delusions of apostolic grandeur.

5. Now we sometimes analogize a bossy elder, preacher, or church member to Diotrephes, but that's fair only to a point. Yes, Diotrephes "loved to be first" or as I have translated it "loved to be the boss," but the real problem with Diotrephes is that his bossy spirit was employed in the rejection of apostolic authority. He opposed the truth of God, no doubt thinking he was not, tried to rally people to his erroneous viewpoint by slandering John, and imposed his error on those he failed to persuade. So it's a bigger and deeper problem than simply insisting on his own way. Truth cannot be taken out of the analysis, a point which goes down hard in our post-modern world.

6. John says that if he comes he will confront Diotrephes about his trashing of him and those who are faithful to the gospel he preaches. Love speaks the truth, and John will not remain silent in service to some false notion that confronting people is unloving.

E. 3 Jn. 11-12

Beloved, do not imitate the evil but the good. The one who does good is from God; the one who does evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius has been favorably testified to by everyone, even by the truth itself; and we also testify, and you know that our testimony is true.

1. John warns his dear friend Gaius not to imitate the evil being done by Diotrephes but rather to imitate the good, which in this context probably refers to continuing to be John's ally and welcoming those sent out by him, specifically Demetrius. Perhaps John is concerned that Gaius may "go wobbly" under the force of Diotrephes's influence and personality.

2. Doing good is a character trait of those born of God; it flows from that relationship. Conversely, the one who does evil has not seen God, meaning he has no knowledge, awareness, or understanding of him. This is a not so veiled reference to Diotrephes who probably rejects John's authority in God's name when in truth he is clueless regarding God.

3. This puts the stakes in John's appeal on a different level. More is involved than simply refusing hospitality.

4. In v. 12 John introduces and recommends Demetrius, who is almost certainly carrying the letter. He says everyone speaks well of Demetrius, and adds that he is spoken well of even by the truth itself. That probably means that the truth of the gospel, both its propositions and its ethical implications, speaks favorably of Demetrius by virtue of his conformity to it. In other words, that objective truth stands as a witness to the kind of man he is.

5. John adds to the commendation that he and those in his immediate circle also vouch for Demetrius's commitment and character. And regarding their testimony, he says Gaius knows they speak the truth.

F. 3 Jn. 13-14

I had many things to write to you, but I do not want to write to you by means of ink and pen. ¹⁴Rather, I hope to see you very soon, and we will speak face to face. Peace to you. The friends here greet you. Greet the friends there by name.

1. John hopes to visit Gaius soon, but that will depend, of course, on whether Gaius remains loyal and receives Demetrius and whoever else may be with him. That may be why he says in v. 10 "if I come."

2. The friends of Gaius who are with John send their greetings to him, and John asks Gaius to pass on his greetings to John's friends who are near Gaius. So they clearly have a number of mutual friends.