

SECOND JOHN

18. How is the danger of idolatry as present, and even more dangerous now than when John wrote?

PART V II and III John

CHAPTER XVII

LETTER TO "THE ELECT LADY AND HER CHILDREN"

II John

A. *Background*

1. Who wrote II John?

The majority of modern scholarship agrees that II John, as well as III John, is written by the author of the Fourth Gospel and I John. This is so obvious that many early scribes included second and third John as part of first John in their manuscripts. The term "the elder" with which the author addresses himself to his reader neither confirms nor denies this.

2. To whom is it written?

The destination of the letter, initially, is not so well agreed upon. Theissen lists five views concerning the original recipient of Second John.

Jerome held that the letter is addressed to the whole church. Lightfoot, Brooke and Zahn contend that it is addressed to some particular local congregation. Wordsworth believed it was intended primarily for the church in Babylon. Others have held that it was addressed to some notable lady.

Among those who hold this latter view, there is disagreement. Law says it is addressed to one Lady Electa. Bengel believes that the Greek *kuria* (usually rendered "lady" in II John) is the Hellenistic form of the Hebrew Martha.

It is possible that Second John is a personal letter addressed to a Christian woman of some influence who was a personal friend and co-

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worker of the author. However, this seems unlikely for reasons we shall mention shortly.

I find it very difficult to agree with A. T. Robertson's statement, "The obvious way of taking it is a woman of distinction in one of the churches . . ." It hardly seems plausible that any single individual could be said to be loved by everyone who knows the truth (verse 1). Further, throughout II John the *eklekte kuria* (elect lady) is sometimes addressed in the plural (vs. 6, 8, 10, 12) as well as the singular (vs. 1, 4, 5, 13). One may address a congregation with the singular when thinking of it collectively, or with the plural when thinking of the individual members. One would hardly address a particular lady of close intimate acquaintance with a plural.

It seems likely that the letter is, as are the other writings of John, a circular letter intended to be read in all the congregations in and about a certain area.

B. *The Text*

"The elder unto the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not I only, but also all they that know the truth; (2) for the truth's sake which abideth in us, and it shall be with us forever: (3) Grace, mercy, peace shall be with us, from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love. (4) I rejoice greatly that I have found certain of thy children walking in truth, even as we received commandment from the Father. (5) And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote to thee a commandment, but that which we had from the beginning that we love one another. (6) And this is love, that we should walk after his commandments. This is the commandment, even as you heard from the beginning, that ye should walk in it. (7) For many deceivers are gone forth into the world, even they that confess not that Jesus Christ cometh in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. (8) Look to yourselves, that ye lose not the things which we have wrought, but that ye receive a full reward. (9) Whosoever goeth onward and abideth not in the teaching of Christ, hath not God: he that abideth in the teaching, the same hath both the Father and the Son. (10) If anyone cometh unto you, and bringeth not this teaching, receive him not into your house, and give him no greeting: (11) for he that giveth him greeting partaketh in his evil works. (12) Having many things to write unto you I would not write them

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with paper and ink; but I hope to come unto you, and to speak face to face, that your joy may be made full. (13) The children of thine elect sister salute thee."

C. *Try to Discover*

1. Who is "the old one"?
2. Who is the "elect lady"?
3. Is there more to v.3 than the mere formality of greeting?
4. Who are the children of v.4?
5. What is the purpose of John's writing in II John?
6. Why is II John so short?

D. *Paraphrase*

"The Elder unto an elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not I alone, but all those also who understand the truth, (2) for the sake of the truth that abideth in us and with us shall be until times age-abiding (3) Favour mercy peace shall be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son of the Father, in truth and love. (4) I rejoiced exceedingly in that I had found from among thy children such as were walking in truth, even as a commandment we received from the Father. (5) And now I request thee lady, not as writing a new commandment unto thee but one which we were holding from the beginning That we should be loving one another. (6) And this is love, that we should be walking according to his commandments: This is the commandment, even as ye heard from the beginning that therein ye should be walking. (7) Because many deceivers have gone out into the world, they who do not confess Jesus Christ coming in flesh: This is the deceiver and the antichrist. (8) Be taking heed unto yourselves, lest ye lose what things we earned, but a full reward ye may duly receive. (9) Every one that taketh a lead and abideth not in the teaching of Christ hath not God: He that abideth in the teaching the same hath both the Father and Son. (10) If anyone cometh unto you and this teaching doth not bring be not receiving him home and Joy to thee! do not say; (11) for he that biddeth him rejoice hath fellowship with his wicked works. (12) Though I had many things to you to write I was not minded to say them with paper and ink; but I hope to come

unto you, and mouth to mouth to talk, that your joy may be made full.
 (13) The children of thy chosen sister salute thee."

E. Translation and Comments

1. Salutation . . . v.1-3

(1) "The old one to an elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, and not only I, but also all the ones having come to know the truth, (2) on account of the truth which is remaining in us, and which with us shall be into eternity. (3) Grace shall be with us, mercy and peace from God as Father, and according to Jesus Christ the Son of the Father, in truth and love."

"Old one" translates *presbuteros*. The term is often used elsewhere in the New Testament to designate the elders of the church. Here John uses it merely to call attention to his age and experience.

The key word here is *alethia*, truth. John loves the elect lady in truth. So also do those who have come to know the truth. The reason for their love is the truth which is remaining in us, and which will be with us into eternity.

II John, as I John, contains a warning against the danger of gnosticism inherent in associating with gnostics. The warning is issued in love. It is because of his personal love for the church, which is shared by all those who have come to know the truth, that he must warn her of the error that stalks her path. For a discussion of the word *agape* (love) see above on I John 2:15-17.

This is not the love of sentiment, nor of selfish gain. John loves the church because for some sixty years and more he has deliberately chosen to give himself to Christ. No one can love Christ and not love the church. (See I John 3:14-ff) So in a real sense John had given himself to the church as well.

Sentimental love, or selfish ambition might prevent such a warning. It is much more popular to be tolerant of error than to try to correct it. Sentiment might dictate a less stern stand against falsehood.

A French proverb says, "There are times when to be only kind is to be not even kind." John demonstrates, in his firmness motivated by love, that the sort of kindness which in our day answers to tolerance is not a manifestation of real Christian love in the presence of error.

This warning of love against error grows out of John's firm persuasion that there is such a thing as objective truth, and that that truth has been

revealed in Jesus as the eternal Word become flesh. All else is false. It is within the sphere of this reality that John proclaims his love. His love is shared by all those who have come to know and who still hold fast to the truth revealed by God in Christ.

Such dogmatic convictions concerning truth and falsehood are, in our day, to say the least unpopular. It is very typical of the sophistry of today's pseudo-intellectual to say nothing is black or white. Everything, we are told, is to be found in the gray area between black and white. Truth is relative; nothing is absolute.

No one would willingly return to the prejudicial pronouncements of anathema against all those who disagree with some sectarian doctrine, which were so typical of past ages. However, there is a real need to remind ourselves that unless there were real black and real white there could be no gray. Unless there be objective truth and falsehood there can be no in-between.

The idea that there is an in-between gray area between the truth of Christ and the error of gnosticism would indeed be repugnant to John. The idea that compromise between revealed truth and human philosophy represents the true Christian position in the twentieth century ought to be a repugnant to us.

The truth concerning the nature of sin, the fundamental necessity of love and the deity of Christ Jesus is transcendent reality. Such reality is "from everlasting to everlasting." Man's pragmatic understanding of himself may shift from one base to another as psychology and its related fields of learning become more and more sophisticated. Man's knowledge of his environment swings from one theory to another as science probes deeper into the microcosm and the macrocosm of the universe.

The fundamental nature of the transcendent God does not change. The identity of His Son does not change. The soul made in His image does not change. The key role of love in both divine and human relationships does not change. The nature of sin and guilt do not change.

These truths are eternal! remaining in us and with us into eternity.

Within the scope of revealed reality, the grace of God is poured out in mercy and its effect is peace.

Perhaps a word should be said about grace. The word *charis* (grace) means: (1) objectively, that which causes favorable regard and (2) subjectively, unearned and unmerited favor, universally and freely given. The grace of God is that within God which causes those who know Him

to cry out "hallowed be Thy Name!" Grace in this sense is seen in the claim, "God is light," and again in the claim, "God is love".

As the grace of God expresses itself toward us it takes the form of mercy. God is absolute perfection. There is no darkness in Him at all. (I John 1:5) The very best man can hope to accomplish is a relative goodness which falls far short of the glory of God. Thus the problem of sin is universal. (Cf. Romans 3:23) The supreme message of divine revelation is the grace of God expressed in mercy and love to lost humanity.

Sin, in its deepest sense, is not merely the breaking of God's commandments, it is the breaking of His heart. It is a crime against love more than law.

A crime against law can be paid for by the exacting of the penalty of law. Not so a crime against love. The only thing that can ever atone for a crime against love is that the one offended take the initiative and forgive. This requires that mercy supercede justice.

So it is that God, whose heart has been broken by man's sin, has in mercy taken the initiative in man's redemption. (Cf. Romans 9:15-ff) God's grace provided salvation while we were dead in trespasses and sins. (Cf. Eph. 2:1-10) Justice was tempered by the mercy of Calvary.

This divine, unmerited favor, poured out on those who will receive it, finds its intended end in peace. This is not peace as the world knows peace. It is contentment which comes from bringing our lives into the light of God's truth and allowing Him to order them according to it. (Cf. Phil. 4:11) It is the peace which comes from the ever-present awareness that the Lord is at hand. (Phil. 4:4-7) It rests in the assurance that "No water can swallow the ship where lies the master of ocean and earth and skies!"

Far from being "the opiate of the people" to lull Christians into the grasp of those who would enslave and exploit, Christian peace is the calm assurance which allows the Christian to overcome in any earthly circumstance because he has learned from Christ that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8:31-39)

Mercy, which issues from the grace of God finds its end in "the peace that passeth all understanding." It not only originates in God as Father, but is according to Jesus Christ the Son of the Father. Justice and mercy are reconciled in the cross.

It is small wonder that a world which has for a generation tried to

disprove the deity of Jesus by undermining the inspiration of the divine record of the incarnation and which now has decided that "God is dead," finds itself in the shadow of universal vaporization by nuclear war, its mental institutions overflowing, and its society in turmoil.

2. The path of loving obedience . . . v.4-6

(4) "I was greatly pleased because I have found (certain) of your children walking in truth, just as we received commandment according to the Father. (5) And now I entreat you, Lady, not as writing you a new commandment, but (the one) which we were having from the beginning, that we should be loving one another. (6) And this is the love, that we should keep on walking according to His commandments."

So many false teachers were abroad that John rejoiced to find certain "children" of the "elect lady" walking according to truth. If we are correct in the conclusion that the elect lady is a local congregation or the church at large in a particular area, the children are members of the church or churches to which John wrote. It is worthy of note that, where we often refer to Christians as "church members," John repeatedly refers to them as children. The New Testament church was not, fundamentally, an organization but a family. Each member was a child of the Father, and, rather esthetically, of the church.

To John the admissible evidence that we have come to know the truth is that we obey the commandments of God. (Cf. I John 2:3) He had learned well the lesson expressed by Jesus in the question ". . . why call ye me Lord, Lord, and do not the things that I say?"

Again, as in I John, we are reminded that the fundamental commandment is that we shall love one another. This is particularly urgent in the midst of such serious controversy as that occasioned by the gnostic error. There can be no healing of the breach caused by error unless those who hold fast to truth do so in love.

But love will not allow compromise! "This is the love, that we keep on walking according to His commandments." While we endeavor, in love, to turn the heretic from the error of his ways, we are to continue obeying all the commands of God.

Love is the fundamental command to Christians, but it is not the only command. The commission of Jesus to the apostles is that they teach us to "observe all things, whatsoever I have commanded you." (Matt. 28:20(a)) "From the beginning" we have had this commandment also.

3. Warning of waywardness . . . v.7-11

(7) "Because many wanderers have gone out into the world, the ones not confessing Jesus as Christ coming in flesh; this is the deceiver and the antichrist. (8) Look to yourselves, in order that you may not lose what we have wrought but that you may receive full wages. (9) Everyone going ahead and not remaining in the teaching of Christ is not having God. (10) If anyone is coming to you and is not bringing this teaching, do not receive him into (your) house, and speak him no greeting; (11) for the one speaking greeting to him is fellowshiping in his evil works."

The pleasure of John at meeting the lady's faithful children is occasioned by the fact that many wandering proponents of gnosticism, having left the fellowship of their home congregations, were going about teaching the heresy in whatever congregations would give them an audience.

It would be difficult to identify the antichrist any more specifically than John does here. The antichrist is any teacher who does not confess that the man Jesus is indeed the eternal Christ coming in flesh.

Here is also the most succinct statement in the New Testament of the incarnation. Together with John 1:14, this statement leaves no room for doubt concerning John's conviction about Jesus. And it is not John's alone; Jesus' identity is the foundation of the Christian faith and fellowship. (Cf. Matt. 16:17-18)

To turn from this conviction is to lose the entire result of apostolic labor. John and the others had but one message (Cf. Gal. 1:6-9). The Galilean carpenter was the Christ, the only begotten God, the eternal Word dwelling as man among men. It was the preaching of this message which formed the authority by which they offered salvation to individual men and women. (Cf. I Cor. 1:21) It was upon the basis of individual salvation that the obedient were added to the church. (Acts 2:47)

To deny the essential truth of the incarnation was to bring both individual salvation and the family of God to naught. John is so vehement in his denunciation of those who deny this truth; without it the whole Christian Gospel is destroyed. The crown of life, the reward of the Christian, is only to those who remain faithful unto death.

John is so certain of the validity of the claim of deity for Jesus, that he goes one step farther. To deny it is to not have God at all!

The deity of Jesus is either the most profound truth known to man, or it is the most calloused lie ever uttered. Since it is true, the denial of it becomes the most heinous blasphemy. There is no middle ground. Jesus is either the Christ coming as flesh or He is not. Since He is, anyone denying that He is, is antichrist and does not have God at all.

It may be possible, at least theoretically, to *know* something of God while denying the deity of Jesus, but it is impossible to *have* God without remaining true to the teaching in the incarnation.

The doctrine, or teaching, of Christ does not mean that which Christ taught. Nor does it refer to teaching about Him. It certainly doesn't refer to the teachings of faith, repentance, baptism, etc. (Cf. Heb. 6:1-ff)

The doctrine of Christ, as Robertson so aptly puts it, is "that of Christ which is the standard of Christian teaching . . ." It is the teaching of Jesus as the Incarnate Christ which is the *sin qua non* of everything Christian.

A great deal of false teaching has been done in the name of progress. There is a universal desire to move forward. Against this, John warns that, "everyone going ahead (or progressing) and not remaining in the teaching of Christ . . ." has gone too far. He has "progressed" until he no longer has God.

This truth has been demonstrated in the twentieth century. At first it was considered "progressive" to follow the higher critics through a labyrinth of alleged proofs that not all of the Bible is authentic. Certain learned men "progressed" still farther to the conclusion that, if the Bible were unreliable, its claim concerning Jesus must be myth rather than historic truth. "Progress" wavered slightly with the advent of Neo-orthodoxy, the crises theology of the mid-twentieth century. From this, "progress" led to existentialism. The ultimate was finally reached when it was acclaimed that "God is dead!"

This latest theological fad is but an admission on the part of its proponents that what John said is true; each individual who does not remain in the doctrine of Christ does not have God!

It has ever been the hallmark of false teachers to claim to be progressive; to possess advanced knowledge; to have a monopoly on scholarship. That which denies Jesus as Christ, and so has no God, is no knowledge at all. As Barclay has it, "Christianity is not a nebulous, undefined, uncontrolled theosophy; it is anchored forever to the historical figure of Jesus Christ."

There comes a time when even love must draw the line. Indeed one might say there is a line already drawn, beyond which Christian love dare not go. That line is drawn at the doctrine that Jesus is the Christ Incarnate.

It may seem inhospitable, but John instructs us not to invite into our houses, or even to greet one who is known to deny the deity of Jesus! John himself is said to have left the public baths when Cerinthus, the champion of gnosticism, came in! Today, it is more popular to enter into scholarly "dialogue" with such men!

To do otherwise than turn false teachers away is to partake of the evil of heresy. Here is a lesson desperately needed among many well-intentioned Christians today; particularly in certain academic circles. In times such as ours, as well as John's, when the church is fighting for its very life against the forces of "progressive" philosophical theology, it is time to "let the redeemed of the Lord say so . . ." (Psalm 107:2)

4. A projected visit and a salutation . . . v.12-13

(12) "Having many things to write to you I would not do so through paper and ink, but I hope to come to you and to speak mouth to mouth, in order that our joy may be having been made full. (13) Children of your elect sister greet you."

Nothing is more difficult than the attempt to bring about the reconciliation of a profound disagreement through written correspondence. John brings his correspondence with the elect lady to a close with much left unsead, but with the hope that he will soon be able to speak "mouth to mouth." The give and take of dialogue frequently accomplishes more than the one-sided presentation of truth, especially in writing.

The church (either the local congregation or the brotherhood in the area surrounding Ephesus) is included in his closing salutation. This is typical of such correspondence in that day. Paul frequently resorts to this form of closing.

F. *Questions for Review*

1. Why did some early scribes include II John as part of the manuscript with I John?
2. What are some of the different views of the identity of "the elect lady?"
3. Which of these views is probably correct? Support your answer.
4. What is the probable meaning of the term "elder" as used here by John?

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5. Against what does II John constitute a warning?
6. How does John's position against gnosticism answer the present day philosophy that "all truth is relative?"
7. The grace of God is that in God which brings about our _____ of Him.
8. The grace of God is expressed toward us in _____ which reaches its intended end in _____.
9. Sin, in its deepest sense, is a crime against _____ more than _____.
10. A crime against law can be punished by _____.
11. A crime against love can only be atoned for by _____. Hence, if we are to be forgiven, God must take the initiative.
12. How would you answer the claim that the peace of God in the heart of Christians is "the opiate of the people" to lull them into the grasp of those who would enslave and exploit?
13. Why is John pleasantly surprised to find the wandering children of the elect lady walking according to truth?
14. The only admissable evidence that we know truth is that we _____.
15. The fundamental commandment of God to His children is that we _____.
16. How does love express itself? (Verse 6)
17. Love will not allow _____ with falsehood.
18. Who does John identify as the antichrist in II John? How does this compare with what John says about the antichrist in I John, chapter 2?
19. The essential truth upon which both the personal salvation of Christians and the fellowship of the church rests is _____.
20. What is meant by "the doctrine of Christ" in II John, chapter 9?
21. What is the danger of "progress" as set forth in II John, chapter 9?
22. Why are we forbidden to be hospitable to false teachers?