

EXPOSITORY NOTES

2 JOHN

Gordon Lyons

Expository Notes

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Introduction and Background

In common with his other two epistles, John (the son of Zebedee) does not append his name to this letter. However, the style and mode of representation is very much that of the apostle John, as can be seen by an examination of the Gospel written by him. In this letter, John refers to himself simply as the 'elder' (or 'presbyter').

Although the church hesitated to accept this letter as the authentic work of John initially, it did accept it as the inspired Word of God latterly. Among the early church fathers who recognised this short letter as the authentic work of John the apostle was Iranaeus (*Against Heresies* 1.16.3); Clement of Alexandria; Alexander, bishop of Alexandria, Jerome and others.

This is a very personal letter (although not necessarily written to an individual). One verse however that may suggest that this letter was written to an individual is verse 10. There, John warns the recipient of his letter not to invite false teachers into her home (or house). It is possible therefore—but not certain—that John was speaking of his recipient's home only. However, even if this were true, the prohibition against inviting false teachers into this person's home in order to listen to and consider their points of view, would apply in principle to all Christian homes.

In this letter, the apostle John expresses in his usual loving way his concern that the children of God continue to obey the Lord's command to love one another. John is concerned also that these believers remain faithful to the truth of God's Word.

The apostle is writing to combat the threat posed to the Church by false teachers; especially those of the Docetic or Cerinthian persuasion—the former an early variant, and the latter an early forerunner of Gnosticism. It is possible that these false teachers were seeking acceptance into the homes of the Lord's people. This happened during their travels around the country. As it was customary for believers to welcome travelling missionaries into their homes, there was a distinct possibility of them welcoming these false teachers by mistake. John expresses serious concern about this. Therefore, in his letter, he addresses this issue and emphasises the need for great vigilance in this respect.

2 John Chapter 1

Salutation and Blessing

The apostle John opens his second letter with these words:

2 John 1:1-3

It is possible that the apostle is addressing a particular individual in Christ. However, by comparing this verse with verse 13, it is also possible that the expression, *to the chosen lady and her children* may refer to a particular local church. This letter, then, could be addressed to a *sister church* and to its *members*. Either way, the aged apostle is tenderly addressing the beloved of the Lord, and pointing out the contents of this short letter.

John's love for the children of God is a pure reflection of the Father's love for them. Out of genuine and heartfelt sympathy and compassion for God's people, John addresses them in the spirit of the Lord Jesus Christ himself. He addresses God's beloved children in the spirit of willing obedience to the Lord's command to love one another as he had loved them. (John 13:34-35; 15:12-14; 1 John 3:23; 4:12)

In his writings, it becomes evident that John does indeed love those whom he is addressing. He writes to those who are participants with him in the truth of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Gospel of eternal salvation. Since united with him in the love and truth of Christ, then it is the apostle's intention to jealously guard the Lord's people from the inroads of error. Likewise, he would protect them from anything else that would lead their hearts astray from the truth of God concerning his beloved Son. (1 John 4:1)

John, however, is quick to point out that it is not only he who loves the children of God. Rather, everyone who shares in the truth of the Gospel and of the eternal Word of God, also demonstrates this love. The love which God has for his children is being shed abroad in each of their hearts by the Holy Spirit—the Spirit of Truth. All who are indwelt by the Spirit know the truth as it is in Jesus. (Rom. 5:5; 1 Cor. 2:12-13)

The Holy Spirit within us opens our understanding to the truth of God's Word. The Holy Spirit has regenerated us, has sealed us to God as his beloved children, and is daily sanctifying us. Again, the Holy Spirit is our promised Comforter or Counsellor—the Paraclete: the one whom Jesus said would guide us into all truth and would stay with us for ever. (John 14:15-18,26)

In verse 3, John writes:

Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, will be with us in truth and love. (NIV)

- The *grace* of God: the undeserved love and favour of God in granting us—and in keeping us secure in—our salvation; and in bestowing upon us every spiritual blessing in Christ Jesus.

- The *mercy* of God: the unmerited love and compassion of the Father in providing an atonement for our sins, and by the blood of that atonement, reconciling us to himself through faith in his Son.
- The *peace* of God: that sublime peace and harmony that transcends all human understanding. The peace of God (or the peace *from* God) is the indescribable peace of a heart forgiven and a conscience cleared of all sin and guilt. It is that peace which a person experiences only when his soul is reconciled to the Father through the atoning blood of Christ.
- *Truth* is that truth and faithfulness which originates in God and is exemplified in Jesus' life and teaching. It is that truth concerning the knowledge of God's salvation and belief in his Son that sets the redeemed sinner free from sin and from the legal and ceremonial constraints of the law. It is that truth which the Holy Spirit reveals to the believer as he searches the Word of God, learning of all its teachings, and applying them to his or her life. And it is that unchanging and inerrant truth which guards the believer from error and false teaching.
- *Love* primarily is that love which originates in God and which was expressed by the giving up of his one and only Son for our redemption. It is that love that God has for us in Christ Jesus, which Christ has for the Church, and which we show toward God out of our gratitude and devotion for all that he has done, and is continuing to do, for us in and through his Son. It is that love which, as believers, we show toward our fellow-believers especially, and also toward those who are yet in their sins. It is an obedient love; a compassionate love; a caring love, and a practical and active love, rather than a sentimental or an emotional love; although, to some extent, these may be involved.

Therefore, concludes the apostle, this triune blessing—*grace, mercy and peace*—will be with God's redeemed people for ever; in the *truth and love* that comes by Christ Jesus.

Walking in Truth and Love

2 John 1:4-6

In verse 4, the apostle begins his letter proper by writing:

2 John 1:4

The apostle rejoices in the knowledge that some of these believers are adhering steadfastly to the truth as revealed in and by Christ Jesus. They have been faithful to the teaching of the Lord as handed down to them by his apostles in their letters and by their oral instruction. This, John declares, accords with the command that we have received from the Father. The Lord has commanded us not only to walk in love, but also to walk in the truth—the truth of God's Word. (John 8:31; 15:1-10; cf. 1 John 2:24)

However, the fact that John says he rejoices to find *some* of these children walking in the truth, clearly implies that others were not thus walking. This must have been of great concern to the aged apostle, and probably occasioned his writing of this apparently urgent letter.

We should observe, however, that the word translated 'some' is not in the Greek text. The literal rendering is, *...found of your children...* The word 'some' has been inserted before the word 'of' by the translators, believing that the Greek ἐκ (*of or from*) implied a certain number.

In verse 5, the apostle returns to the theme that is fundamental to his first letter, and indeed to the whole of practical Christian experience—love:

2 John 1:5

John is eager to reassure the recipient of this letter that the command to love one another is not a new command. Rather, it is the same command that they—and all other believers—have had from the very outset of their conversion to Christ, and one which the Lord Jesus himself gave to his disciples.

Why, however, did it become necessary for the apostle to reiterate this basic truth? Possibly because of the division that was threatening the Lord's people. Even if there is some doubt over the correct interpretation of verse 4, it was indeed probable that some (only) were walking in the truth: That is, in love and humility, they were conforming their lives to the teaching of the Lord Jesus and his inspired apostles. Others, however, may have been less than willing to obey fully the commands or teachings of the Lord and his apostles. These believers therefore did not show the same measure of love and humility as did their more faithful brothers and sisters. One of the consequences of their lack of commitment was a failure to walk in—i.e., to obey and to adhere steadfastly to—the truth of God's Word.

Clearly, this was a matter for immense concern. It was a matter that greatly alarmed the apostle, and one with which he would need to deal—gently but firmly. John would need to deal with this matter, however, in a spirit of genuine love between the recipient, the recipient's local fellowship, and himself. (Cf. Gal. 6:1)

In verse 6, John writes:

2 John 1:6

What is love? It is walking in obedience—obedience to the truth. It is obeying the commands or teachings of the Lord Jesus and of the Word of God as a whole. This is a very important point of doctrine in a day when we are being told that love is more important than anything else. It is true that love is the greatest of spiritual fruits, and that without it any exercise of spiritual gifts is worthless. Nevertheless, this does not mean that we must sacrifice truth on the altar of love. This is the very antithesis of what God's Word teaches. (Gal. 5:22; 1 Cor. 13ff; Eph. 4:15; 1 John 3:18; 3 John 1:1)

It was necessary for John to say this, because it was likely that those who were not walking in the truth were using this very argument in their defence. They would claim that showing love toward one another involved accepting their divergent points of view. However, where these diverse points of view amounted to a departure from the truths of God's Word, it needed correcting. Therefore, the apostle reminds these believers that—although they must love one another—their love for one another must never lead them to compromise the truth of God's Word. Again, they must not begin to tolerate false teaching under the pretext of love. (Cf. Gal. 1:6-10)

Since the time of their conversion to Christ, the apostles had been reminding the believers of the Lord's command that they should walk in love. This involved living a life characterised by love for God. It also involved practising love, kindness and compassion toward their brothers and sisters in Christ, and—more generally—toward their neighbours. Believers demonstrated this kind of love by the practical measures that they took willingly to help others in their need. However, infers John, while the Lord enjoined us to walk in love, he also enjoined his followers to walk in obedience to his commands. He required us to observe, to apply and to defend every truth of his Word.

Do Not Welcome False Teachers

2 John 1:7-11

In verse 7, the apostle writes:

2 John 1:7

These believers must not allow themselves to be misled. Already, many false teachers had been making their presence felt among them, and they were threatening the believers—and the church's—spiritual welfare. This was why it was essential that the believers obeyed the Lord's command to love one another, and to walk in the truth—i.e., the light or teaching—of his Word.

Over the years, John, and the other apostles, had delivered God's Word to the churches. In all that time, God's people had never received anything from the apostles, or from other NT writers, but the inspired Word of God. These Spirit-inspired servants of the Lord Jesus had transmitted God's Word to the churches, both by word of mouth and by their letters.

From the teaching that the apostles had imparted to the believers over these years—including those to whom John was now writing—they knew the truth concerning the Lord Jesus. They knew that he was, and forever remains, God's one and only Son—the one whom the Father had given for the redemption of lost men and women. These believers knew, too, that the eternal Word—the Logos—had taken upon himself a real and true human nature (sin apart). Furthermore, they were fully aware that Jesus was the God-Man: truly God and yet truly man.

Since they knew these fundamental truths, then they knew also that anyone who disputed or denied these truths could not possibly be speaking by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit never gives credence to false teaching or erroneous doctrine.

Anyone who denied the incarnation of the Son of God, or the true and real humanity of the Lord Jesus (or his true and real deity), was the representative of the deceiver. *The deceiver* is Satan—the originator or father of lies. If, however, these false teachers were the ambassadors of Satan, then these believers, and the church as a whole, must have absolutely nothing to do with them. Whenever the church became aware of the evil nature of their teaching, the church must reject them utterly. Failure to do so would result not only in the distortion of individual believer's convictions, but in the distortion of other believer's convictions also. Ultimately, this would lead to unsound views concerning the most fundamental truths of God's Word, to permissiveness of character and conduct, and eventually to spiritual insensitivity or apathy. (John 8:44; 2 Pet. 2:1; Rev. 12:9)

Besides their being the ambassadors of Satan, these false teachers epitomised the anti-christ—the very one who exalts and opposes himself against God. Since, however, these corrupters of God's truth did in fact exemplify the antichrist, then all the more reason why God's redeemed and holy people must not receive their insidious and perverse teaching into their hearts and lives. While these messengers of evil purported to be from God, they and their teachings were satanic. (1 John 2:18,22; 4:3)

Then, in verse 8, the apostle writes this word of warning:

2 John 1:8

Watch out— [Take heed, or Look to yourselves...]

The apostle John exhorts the believers to be exceedingly careful that they do not forfeit everything for which he and they had laboured. Not, of course, meaning their salvation,

which they could not forfeit—but rather their growth in grace and in the faith. Perhaps, too, their increase in the knowledge of God, and their practical godly manner of life.

So long as these believers remained steadfastly loyal to the truth of God's Word, they were not likely to be influenced unduly by false teaching. If, however, they did not remain faithful to the truth, then it was much more likely that they would listen to, and give credence to, erroneous or false teaching. The believers even may begin to think that this false teaching was simply an acceptable alternative interpretation of God's Word.

Such would be the deceit practised by Satan on their minds. Indeed, if the believers were not diligent in holding to the truth, the devil would soon succeed in making them swallow the lies of his evil delegates, the false teachers. (Cf. Gal. 1:6-9)

Although salvation is not in any way dependent upon works, rewards certainly are. At God's judgment seat, we will give account of ourselves to God for every thought, word and deed. However, God will also assess us for the *quality* of good works that we have performed in the name of Christ. Again, God will judge us for the way in which we have taught others about God's Word (a more strict judgment). Similarly, he will judge us for the way in which we have taught ourselves of that Word—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. (1 Cor. 3:11-15; 2 Cor. 5:9-10; Jas. 3:1)

Where we fall short, then this failure will be reflected in the level of reward we will receive—or will fail to receive—at the judgment seat of Christ.

In verse 9, John declares:

2 John 1:9

(9a) Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God.... (NIV)

It must have nearly broken the apostle's heart to have had to write such words. John was the apostle whose life and teaching demonstrated love: spiritual, practical and emotional love. Now, out of the concern of his heart for his fellow-believers, he finds it necessary to issue this stern warning: those who go beyond the teaching of Christ, do not continue in his teaching. Those who do not continue in Christ's teaching, do not have God. In other words, they are not God's children—whatever may be their claims to the contrary.

Some would inform us that—by rejecting those people whose interpretation of God's Word differs from ours—we are failing to show Christian love and understanding. They would try to persuade us to accept other people's points of view in a spirit of tolerance, forbearance and love.

To such an objection, it may be answered: it is not we who reject these false teachers, but the Lord himself. It is the Lord's apostle—writing by inspiration of the Holy Spirit—who says that they are [of] *the deceiver and the antichrist* (v.7); i.e., they are emissaries of Satan. (2 Cor. 11:13-15)

We are not talking here about brothers and sisters in Christ who differ on some minor point of doctrine or church practice. Such differences are perfectly acceptable, so long as they do not lead to dissension or division. Rather, the people being referred to are those who differ in the fundamental truths of God's Word. The particular example alluded to by the apostle was probably to the Cerinthians; i.e., those who denied the true humanity of God's Son. To accept such false teaching, however, is to reject the very teaching of God's own infallible and inerrant Word.

Therefore, writes the apostle,

(9a) Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God.... (NIV)

In the next part of verse 9, John continues:

(9b) ...whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. (NIV)

Those who adhere steadfastly to the truth as it is in Jesus, have both the Father and the Son dwelling in their hearts and lives, in the person of the Holy Spirit. This is in contradistinction from the false teachers. For all their avowals to greater spiritual enlightenment and knowledge, they do not possess the Holy Spirit of God. This is the crux of the matter, and this is why we must repudiate their teaching. For without the Spirit of God, they can never know God's ways properly. Since they can never know God's ways properly, how can they hope to teach *us* God's ways properly!?! (Isa. 8:20; Rom. 8:9; 1 Cor. 2:14)

Like most of those to whom John was writing, we *do* have the Holy Spirit. We are abiding in Christ and he is abiding in us. Thus, we ought to continue to abide in him. We should continue to walk in love and in obedience to his truth. If we do these things, the Holy Spirit will continue to lead us into all truth. What person without God's Spirit can teach us more than the Holy Spirit himself? Let us hold fast, therefore, to the teaching of the Spirit-filled men whom God has given us. But, let the church reject utterly any teaching that is not of God's Holy Spirit, and that does not originate from, and remain firmly based on, God's own written Word—the Bible.

Therefore, says the apostle,

(9) Anyone who runs ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God; whoever continues in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. (NIV)

In verse 10, John writes:

2 John 1:10

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. (NIV)

If any person came into the midst of these believers—but did not bring with him the teaching that the believers had received from the Lord and from his apostles—they were not to accept him. If this person had come to a believer's home with the purpose of imparting any doctrine that was at variance with the Word of God, the believer was not to welcome this person or encourage them in their false opinions. Certainly, no child of God was to invite such a person into his or her home in order to consider their false doctrines. By all means, believers were to invite and welcome God's own people into their homes. Where, however, a person came to a believer's door with a variation or distortion of God's truth, the believer was not to give that person the slightest encouragement.

What was true of the lady (or church) to whom John was writing, is true also in respect of the church more generally, including the church today. We know the truth of God's Word. Therefore, we must not let false teachers lead us away from this truth. Despite what a politically-correct and permissively tolerant society would tell us concerning those who differ with us in matters of the faith, we must bear in mind what God's Word declares; viz., that false teachers are the emissaries of Satan. Therefore, they have been equipped by Satan to accomplish their task of deception persuasively and effectively. Hence the reason we must not welcome them or listen to them. (2 Cor. 11:13-15; 1 Tim. 4:1-2)

But who are these false teachers who might come to our doors? In John's day, it would include the Cerinthians—an early form of Gnostic false teaching. Today, a plethora of false teaching proliferates, threatening the church from within and without. Although claiming to belong to God, and while making use of God's Word in part, these false teachers distort, misuse and misapply that Word to their own ends. This, however, is exactly what the false apostles of John's day were guilty of doing. It was for this reason that the apostle John said,

(10) If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not take him into your house or welcome him. (NIV)

Then, in verse 11, the apostle adds this solemn warning:

2 John 1:11

Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (NIV)

Anyone who receives such a false teacher into his home—or who wishes him God's blessing on his departure—shares with him in his wicked work. By receiving such a person, he is thereby encouraging him in his propagation of false teaching. By wishing him God's blessing—which, of course, God will not bestow on him—the false teacher is being led to believe that we support his teaching. At the very least, he believes that we are willing to consider his teaching a valid alternative interpretation of God's Word.

This, however, is the very thing that the apostle John says we must not do. We must not give the slightest encouragement to these false teachers. The only encouragement we ought to provide is that encouragement which directs them to repent of their wicked work, confess their sin to God and utterly renounce their involvement with false teaching and false teachers.

Therefore, says the apostle,

(11) Anyone who welcomes him shares in his wicked work. (NIV)

John's Proposed Visit

In verse 12, the apostle begins the conclusion of his letter by saying:

2 John 1:12

John had a great deal more to say to his recipient, but he wanted to wait until they could meet personally. Then, he would be able to explain all these points much more fully. Then, too, he would be able to point out the dangers inherent in tolerating false teachers. These dangers affected not only one person's faith, but also the faith of those other believers who were in any way influenced by this one person.

Closing Greetings

In verse 13, the apostle closes with these words:

2 John 1:13

From the form of this greeting, perhaps it is possible to surmise that the 'lady' to whom John has been writing is a sister church rather than an individual (although, compare the personal form of address in verse 5). At any event, the apostle passes on the greetings

from the children—i.e., the members—of his own local church to the church (or person) to whom he is writing. Such is the bond of love and fellowship between the churches of the Lord's people that whatever affects one local church in Christ affects the others. For all are members of the one Church—the body of Christ—and when one member suffers, other members of the body suffer in sympathy. When one member rejoices in the truth, all the other members rejoice with it.

From this short letter, we learn how important it is to hold fast to the truth as it is in Christ Jesus, and to abide in him and in the teaching of God's Word alone. False teachers will always be found among the people of God. However, it is our solemn responsibility to search the Scriptures daily so that we may learn the truths of God's holy and inerrant Word as the Holy Spirit guides us from its sacred pages. Only then, will we be able to distinguish between true and false teaching, embracing the former and repudiating the latter. By so doing, God's name will be honoured and glorified, and his Truth exalted.