

2 John: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] 2 John The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth, are not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever.

Grace, mercy and peace be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ the Father's Son, in truth and love. I rejoiced greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father.

And now I ask you, dear lady, not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning, that we love one another. And this is love, that we walk according to his commandments.

This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, so that you should walk in it. For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh.

Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you may not lose what we have worked for, but may win a full reward. Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ does not have God.

[1 : 08] Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, or give him any greeting, for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works.

Though I have much to write to you, I would rather not use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and talk face to face, so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister greet you.

2 John covers much of the same ground as the 1st epistle of John, and clearly comes from the same hand. As 2 John and 3 John are the two shortest books in the scriptures, and don't address much that isn't already addressed in the book of 1 John, some might wonder why they were included in the New Testament at all.

Luke Timothy Johnson advances the intriguing possibility that all three letters were sent at the same time by the hand of Demetrius. 3 John recommends Demetrius to Gaius, and 2 John was intended to be publicly read in Gaius' church.

1 John is less of a letter than a homily, exhorting the members of the church. In contrast to his 1st epistle, something possibly explained by the fact that 1 John was not intended to be a letter, 2 John begins with his self-identification and his addressees.

[2 : 27] John here speaks of himself as the Elder. Elders were overseers of congregations. And as a shepherd of the flock, even though an apostle, it was appropriate for John to term himself an Elder.

Peter does the same in 1 Peter 5, verses 1-3, where he gives us a sense of what being an Elder meant. So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow Elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed, shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you, not for shameful gain, but eagerly, not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

The letter is addressed to the elect lady and her children. Some have suggested that the elect lady is a female individual of status. More recently, others have suggested that the figure might have been a woman who pastored a particular congregation.

These readings are weak ones, however. As we go through the letter, we will see an alternation between a singular addressee and multiple addressees that suggests that the woman is a way of referring to a congregation.

In 1 Peter 5, verse 13, we see another example of a particular congregation being personified as a woman, once again being referred to as chosen. She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings.

[3 : 51] This brief letter also ends by speaking of the elect lady's sister's children who send greetings. The fact that the children of the elect sister send greetings, but nothing is mentioned about the elect sister herself sending greetings, supports the idea that the elect sister is a personification of the congregation.

The personification of the church as a woman is something that we find elsewhere in the New Testament, with the description of the church as the bride of Christ. Christ is the divine husband who takes his chosen people to himself.

John's use of the term elect, or chosen to refer to the woman here, might make us think of the way that we have been set apart for Christ as his bride. We might also identify the application of bridal imagery and the personification of a single church as a woman in 2 Corinthians 11, verse 2.

For I feel a divine jealousy for you, since I betrothed you to one husband, to present you as a pure virgin to Christ. The image of the church as the bride of Christ underlines its continual and necessary relationship to Christ as its divine husband, from whose loving choice it derives its life and identity.

Perhaps a less likely, but nonetheless intriguing possibility, is that the term lady here doesn't actually mean lady at all, but means congregation. Robert Yarborough notes that the same Greek word is used elsewhere in ancient sources to refer to a civic organisation comprised of multiple assemblies.

[5 : 20] If this is the case, it would be the only place where we see the word so used in the New Testament. In 1 John, John has addressed the hearers of the epistle as children on several occasions.

He speaks of his children again in 3 John, verse 4. Now he does so, expressing his love for them, a love shared by all who know the truth. The reference to children, as the reference to the lady, should not be taken as a literal reference to natural children, but rather to children in the Lord, to those brought to a new birth and raised in the faith through John's personal ministry and the ministry of the congregation of the elect lady.

In 1 John, John had maintained that love for the brothers was a hallmark of those who loved God and the truth. The way that he describes believers' relationship with the truth here gives weight to the idea that he regards truth as situated in the person of Jesus Christ.

It isn't a lifeless truth, it's a living one that abides with us and will endure forever. This truth is personally known in Jesus Christ. He doesn't just wish them grace, mercy and peace, as we might see in one of Paul's letters, but claims that grace, mercy and peace will be with us.

These things come to us from God the Father and Jesus Christ his Son in truth and in love. Yarborough writes, In truth and love reflects John's conviction that there is a theological norm, truth, grounded in God's wisdom suffused with an agapic quality, love, innate to God's being.

[6 : 52] The truth and love of Father and Son establish a framework within which, John is certain, God's grace, mercy and peace will be at work among Christ's followers. In a manner that might remind us of Paul's responses to seeing the progress of the churches to which he had ministered, John greatly rejoices to hear about the progress of the members of the churches to whom he is writing in the faith.

Perhaps he had met these members of the congregation in the course of his travels, or perhaps they had visited the church of which he was an overseer. Now he addresses their congregation, just as he does throughout the first epistle, which might well have accompanied this letter, he asks them to love each other.

This is not some new teaching or instruction that he is giving them, but the fundamental teaching that has been given to the congregation and to the church more broadly from the beginning. The statement here is similar to that found in 1 John 2, verses 7-8.

Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you had from the beginning. The old commandment is the word that you have heard. At the same time, it is a new commandment that I am writing to you, which is true in him and in you, because the darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining.

The commandment to love is the unity of the white light that is refracted in the prism of the law to reveal the full spectrum of the commandments. Once again, John helps us to recognize both the singularity and the plurality of the law of God.

[8 : 23] The commandment to love does not involve the reduction of the commandments of God, as if removing all the excess to reveal a simple, streamlined, and more feasible version.

No, the commandment to love is the commandment that gathers in itself all of the other commandments, holding them in unity. The heart of the epistle of 2 John is the warning concerning the disciples John had previously described these persons in 1 John 2, verses 18-23.

Children, it is the last hour, and as you have heard that Antichrist is coming, so now many Antichrists have come. Therefore we know that it is the last hour. They went out from us, but they were not of us.

For if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain, that they all are not of us. But you have been anointed by the Holy One, and you all have knowledge.

I write to you, not because you do not know the truth, but because you know it, and because no lie is of the truth. Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the Antichrist, he who denies the Father and the Son.

[9 : 30] No one who denies the Son has the Father. Whoever confesses the Son has the Father also. He had called his hearers to test the spirits in 1 John 4, verses 1-3.

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God. For many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God.

Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you heard was coming, and now is in the world already.

All of this is according to the warning that Jesus had given in the Olivet Discourse concerning false teachers that would come. The mark of these false teachers is their failure to confess a central claim of the faith, that Christ came in the flesh.

Speaking of his coming implies his divine origin, the fact that he comes from heaven. The confession of his coming in the flesh insists upon the truth of his humanity.

[10 : 33] The danger is that, having struggled and laboured for the faith, people adopting this error might be in danger of losing out, holding to some lesser Jesus and not the true one. They must be vigilant, watching themselves, lest anyone fall short as their faith is shaken.

Their concern must be to abide in the teaching of Christ, because in the truth of that teaching, they will enjoy fellowship with the Father and with the Son. In a situation of error spreading through the Church, and in a situation of such high spiritual stakes, it is absolutely imperative that the lines are kept very clear.

It most definitely is not. For the sake of people's spiritual well-being, no signs of friendship or support should be given to them. The endings of 2 John and 3 John are very similar.

If joy is an expression of love that achieves its end of communion, there should, according to the logic of John's theology, be a joy characteristic not only of our relationship with God, but also of our relationship to our brothers and sisters.

As in his first epistle, John's employment of familial language here is important. It fits neatly with his emphasis upon being born of God and loving each other as brothers and sisters.

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