

LESSON 12

SECOND AND THIRD JOHN

Introduction to 2 John

Authorship

This brief Epistle of thirteen verses likely was written by the same person who wrote 1 John. Because of its brevity, there are few allusions to it in the writings of the early Fathers. Polycarp may have referred to 2 John 7; however, there is similar content in 1 John 4:2 and 3, and his reference may have been to these verses. The Muratorian Fragment (about A.D. 170) mentions two Johannine epistles but does not specify them. Although 2 John and 3 John were known by the Church Fathers by A.D. 200, they continued to be among the disputed books into the fourth century.

The author did not name himself but did refer to himself as "the elder" (v.1). The Greek word translated "elder" means primarily seniority. In Christian circles, it may have been used as an affectionate title for an older man who spoke of younger Christians as children. There is no clear evidence that the author used elder to distinguish himself from the apostles. Some scholars, however, have challenged the tradition of the Church which identifies the elder with the Apostle John since Papias said, "If I met with anyone who had been a follower of the elders any where, I made it a point to inquire what were the declarations of the elders. What was said by Andrew, Peter or Philip. What by Thomas, James, John, Matthew, or any other of the disciples of our Lord. What was said by Aristion, and the presbyter [elder] John, disciple of the Lord."¹ Eusebius observed that the name of John was mentioned twice: first along with Peter, James, Matthew, and the other apostles and then with Aristion. He concluded that there were two Johns in Asia and that there were two tombs in Ephesus. Eusebius proposed that the first John (the apostle) wrote the Gospel and the second (the elder) wrote Revelation. Jerome assigned 1 John to the apostle and 2 John and 3 John to the elder. Although there are differences in style, the similarities in the Gospel and the Epistles give the impression of a single author.

Many phrases in 2 John and 3 John are identical with phrases in 1 John or at least give evidence of acquaintance with it. These common characteristics with the First Epistle point to the same author for the Fourth Gospel and the three Epistles.

¹Eusebius *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.4.

One reason for the theory of two different authors named John is Papias' listing of a John with other _____ and a John referred to as the _____ (elder).

(apostles, presbyter)

Similarities in the Fourth Gospel and the Epistles of John point to the _____ as author.

(Apostle John)

Recipients

The Second Epistle is addressed to the "elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth" (v.1). Several theories have been suggested to explain whom John had in mind. Jerome said that he addressed the whole church. More recent scholars, such as A.B. Lightfoot and A.E. Brooke, have suggested that the Epistle was addressed to a particular local church. The language in verses 5 and 13 points to a prominent and influential Christian sister and her children. The "elect lady" could have referred to an individual acquaintance of the writer or to the church community. The Greek word for church is feminine and would fit the description of the elect lady. Paul spoke of the Church as the bride of Christ (Eph. 5:29f.).

To whom is 2 John addressed? _____

(the elect lady and her children)

Date and purpose

It is difficult to determine accurately the date of this Epistle, but it was composed perhaps during the same period as the First Epistle. Probably little time elapsed between the writing of the First and Second Epistles. The content indicates that the false teachers were the same as those referred to in 1 John. The author wrote to warn the elect lady of the false doctrines of the Docetics. Apparently these teachers were moving from church to church and taking advantage of the hospitality of the Christian people. Their influence was dangerous, and the churches needed to be warned in order to avoid being led into error.

The author's purpose in 2 John was to warn against the f_____d_____ of the Docetics.

(false doctrines)

Interpretation of 2 John

The greeting (1-3)

Papyrus letters contemporary to 2 John show that the Epistle has the form of a private letter. It carries a heavy theological orientation which suggests that it may have been addressed to a community of believers rather than to an individual. Papyrus was the paper of the Greco-Roman world and was made from strips of pith. Pith was from the papyrus plant which grew on the banks of the Nile River. A layer of thin strips of pith was laid down, then a second layer was placed on the first with the strips at right angles to those on the first. The material was dampened with water or a liquid adhesive, and the two layers were pressed together. Usually the papyrus sheets were 5 x 9 or 11 inches in size.

What makes 2 John appear to have been written to an individual?

What makes it appear to have been written to a community of believers?

(Compare your answers with the text.)

The identity of the elder, the elect lady, and her children has already been discussed. The Epistle reveals that the children of the lady were with her, but she also had an elect sister whose children sent greetings (v.13). This language seems to refer to two churches in which the children were members.

The loving concern of the elder for the lady and her children was not mere sentiment which could have degenerated into lust, but it was rational and moral goodwill towards those who had come to know the truth.

Throughout the Fourth Gospel, truth has reference to God's self-revelation in Jesus Christ. Churches are made up of those who have accepted the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and the Father is in Him. Receiving the truth creates a common bond which extends beyond the elder and one church to all who know the truth and are bound together by love.

Although the elder began the Epistle in the third person, he shifted to the first person and included himself along with the children and the elect lady as those in whom truth dwells. This indwelling of truth revealed in Christ inspires fidelity.

Since the truth "shall be with us forever" (v.2), the author predicted grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ would be with him and his readers. The use of the future tense indicates what was expected rather than expressing a wish for divine blessings. The salutation does not invoke the usual divine blessing but states that grace, mercy, and peace shall be with us (v.3). Grace and mercy are closely related. Grace focuses on God's willingness to give to undeserving man. Mercy focuses on God's willingness to forgive sinful man. Peace is the result of having received God's grace and mercy. These blessings were revealed in Christ who is truth. They were motivated by love which was manifested in the work of Christ.

An exhortation and a warning (4-11)

The author tactfully prepared for the exhortation by mentioning his joy in finding some of the lady's children obeying the truth (v.4). "Walking in truth" emphasized an enduring belief that the Son of God had come in the flesh to reveal the will of the Father to His chosen. The alternative would be to walk in the error of the Gnostics. Perhaps the threatening doctrines had strained relations within the church, and there was need for the members to be reminded of the commandment of love (v.5). As in the First Epistle, the author referred to this commandment as nothing new, for it had existed from the beginning. The commandment to love one another is stated in the Old Testament as love for one's neighbour. Jesus tied it to the great commandment of loving God. "That we love one another" is the central message of this Epistle.

Christians are commanded to practise love in daily conduct (v.6). Since this requirement for conduct is a commandment, love must be expressed in order to obey God. This love does not describe a sentimental or sensuous relationship but a concern which expresses itself in actions. Obedience to God and love for God cannot be separated.

John identified the deceivers as those who teach that Jesus Christ did not come in the flesh (v.7). In the First Epistle, he labelled this same group as antichrists and noted that they left the fellowship of believers to join the world. They were probably

The truth referred to is that Jesus is the _____ of _____ and the Father is in _____.

(Son, God, Him)

Because Gnostic teachings had probably brought about strained relations in the church, John emphasized the _____ of _____.

(commandment, Love)

The deceivers mentioned in verse 7 were called _____ in John's First Epistle.

(Compare your answer with the text.)

Docetics who denied that the fleshly body of Christ was real. Other false teachers said that the Christ came upon Jesus at His baptism and departed from Him before His crucifixion. John emphasized that the truth was that the divine Christ came in the person of Jesus who was human. John warned his readers not to go beyond or depart from teachings which they had received earlier (v. 8).

In their eagerness to learn more from the travelling evangelists and missionaries who came their way, the Christians were in danger of accepting doctrines which were heretical. Some of the visitors were deceivers; therefore, the Christians must be on guard lest they be led astray. These heretical teachers went beyond the teachings of Christ, especially the teaching that the divine Word became flesh and dwelt among us. They taught that the Word only appeared to assume human flesh, and this teaching left them as men without God (v. 9). The theme of the First Epistle as well as the Second is that whoever believes the teachings of Christ has both the Son and the Father abiding in him (v. 9).

The soundness of the false teachers' doctrine could be determined by examining it in the light of the fundamental truth of the gospel (v.10). That fundamental doctrine concerned the nature of Jesus Christ. John advised his readers not to extend hospitality to visitors who spread false doctrine because to do so was to participate in their evil deeds (v.11).

John was combating heresy which threatened the existence of the church. Heretics who deny the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ continue to visit homes and to lead astray those who are seeking the truth. This danger can be avoided only by giving Christians a solid foundation concerning Christ and by avoiding the doctrines of false teachers. The average Christian is not prepared to detect deceit in doctrines which sound orthodox.

Conclusion (12-13)

The author indicated that he had so many things to share with them that it would be impossible to include all in a letter: "I would not write with paper and ink" (v.12). Perhaps his brief Epistle had filled the papyrus sheet. Rather than including additional teachings in a letter, he expressed the desire to visit them and to strengthen their faith in order that their joy would be complete. He closed the Epistle with the greeting of the children of the "elect sister" to the "elect lady and her children."

Introduction to 3 John

Authorship

This Epistle and 2 John have so many similarities that they are usually discussed together. Little doubt has been raised to the assumption that 2 and 3 John

The heretical teachers taught that the Word only appeared to be _____

(human)

Is this statement true or false?

John advised the believers to be hospitable to visitors regardless of their teaching of false doctrines.

_____. Why? _____

(false; to extend hospitality was to participate in their evil deeds)

were written by the same author. Their style and spirit are the same, and their conclusions agree almost word for word.

The Muratorian Fragment did not present the Apostle John as the author of 3 John. Clement of Alexandria and Dionysius of Alexandria accepted it as being written by the Apostle. Origen and Eusebius classed it as doubtful. The Epistle was endorsed by the Third Council of Carthage which met in 397.

As in 2 John, the writer introduced himself as "the elder" and placed much emphasis on "the truth." The heretical teachings which threatened the church appeared to be the same. Regarding hospitality, 2 John forbids it for false teachers and 3 John commends it for true teachers. This Epistle's similarities to 2 John make it evident that the arguments for authorship for one apply to the other.

Recipients

Third John conforms to the style of personal letters written in the first century. It is addressed to a person named Gaius. However, no further identification of this person is given. He could have been Gaius of Derbe, Gaius of Corinth, the companion of Paul on his third missionary journey from Macedonia, or some other Gaius. It appears that he was a prominent member of some church in Asia Minor, and the Apostle John felt some responsibility for guiding and supervising that church.

Gaius was commended for his consistent Christian life and generous hospitality. Perhaps he was a member of the same church as Diotrephes whose behaviour was the main subject of the letter.

The purpose

Apparently John sent representatives to give instruction to the church, but the strangers were not received by Diotrephes. They returned to John and reported the situation in the church. Diotrephes was guilty of criticizing the Apostle himself and of threatening to excommunicate those who wanted to receive the representatives of John. Gaius had been more cordial towards the visitors; therefore, John wrote him and gave guidance as to how to handle the undesirable situation.

Interpretation of 3 John

Salutation (v.1)

The author referred to himself as "the elder," the same term as appears in 2 John. He identified the recipient as "the wellbeloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth." Possibly Gaius was converted under the ministry of John and was taught by him. He is referred to as one of the children of the elder in verse 4. Again, the common element which was the foundation for the relationship of the elder and Gaius was the truth.

It is believed that 3 John had the same author as 2 John, probably the

_____.

(Apostle John)

To whom is 3 John addressed? _____

(Compare your answer with the text.)

John wrote to commend _____ and to guide in an undesirable situation with

_____.

(Gaius, Diotrephes)

The foundation for the relationship between John and Gaius was the _____.

(truth)

This probably meant the teachings of Jesus Christ as set forth in the Fourth Gospel.

Concern and commendation (vv. 2-8)

The Apostle's concern included the physical health of Gaius but focused on his spiritual health (v. 2). John had received word of his spiritual progress from some of the brethren who had returned from a visit in the church (v. 3). He was much encouraged to know that Gaius continued to hold to the truth concerning Jesus Christ. Verse 4 indicates that the elder had a unique relation to Gaius concerning his spiritual birth and Christian growth. After contrasting the convictions and conduct of his little children with the false teachings of the heretics, John rejoiced that they continued in the truth (v. 4).

The strangers were the brethren sent by John; they were travelling teachers or missionaries (v. 5). The custom of the early churches was to provide hospitality for those who travelled in the interest of the gospel. John commended Gaius for the concern he had shown for the missionaries. This hospitality was in accordance with the faith and was one way that Gaius demonstrated that he was keeping the faith. His charity was not limited to those whom he knew but was extended to strangers as well. These missionaries had reported back to their home church what Gaius had done; therefore, his charitable deeds were widely known (v. 6).

John politely requested Gaius to continue recognizing the importance of the work the missionaries were doing and to help them in the future in ways worthy of God's servants. In contrast to the elder's advice in 2 John to avoid helping heretics, he recommended the support of the missionaries who taught the truth. The heretics were being guided by the evil one, but the missionaries went out for the sake of the name of Christ. In their work among the Gentiles, they had received no reimbursement or support (v. 7). The church was obligated to share in the ministry of the missionaries by supporting such men (v. 8). By such actions, the church would be sharing in the spreading of the truth.

The rebuke of Diotrephes (vv. 9-10)

Apparently John had written a letter with regard to the missionaries who went out from his church to the church of which Gaius was a member (v. 9). The letter was possibly a recommendation of the missionaries. Apparently Diotrephes had received the letter but had not respected the recommendation of the Apostle John. Some believe that Diotrephes was the pastor of the church where Gaius was a member. On the other hand, he may have been only one of a number of leaders, but he attempted to dominate the church. Reference is made to the motive of pride and desire for pre-eminence which controlled the actions of Diotrephes. He demonstrated his importance by rejecting the recommendation from the Apostle John. It

John commended Gaius for his concern towards strangers who were the _____ sent by _____.

(brethren, John)

Diotrephes may have been _____ of the church or at least a _____.

(pastor, leader)

appears that he refused to receive the missionaries who came and threatened to excommunicate any members who did receive them (v.10). Diotrephes justified his refusal of the Apostle's recommendation by making slanderous accusations against John and the missionaries. He also barred the missionaries from the church rather than welcoming them as brothers. John was confident that he had enough respect among the brethren to require Diotrephes to account for his actions when he would visit the church later.

Commendation of Demetrius (vv. 11-12)

For the fourth time, Gaius was addressed as beloved. He was instructed not to follow the evil example of Diotrephes but to do good. He was reminded that the one who does good is of God, but whoever does evil is not of God.

Demetrius was introduced as one who was an example of good. Evidently he was one of the missionaries who went out from the Apostle's church. The people of the church, evidently his home church, had given a good report concerning him, and his conduct demonstrated that the truth of the gospel was put into practice in his life (v.12). Gaius could depend on the report as being true.

Conclusion (vv.13-15)

The Epistle is concluded with the customary words of farewell much like 2 John. The Apostle expressed his preference of visiting the church and speaking with them directly rather than corresponding with pen and ink. The word for pen has reference to a reed, suggesting the plant from which the writing instrument was made. John expressed the typical Jewish greeting of peace (*shalom*) and requested that his friends be greeted.

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| | <p><i>One who was an example of good and went out from the Apostle's church was _____.</i></p> <p><i>(Demetrius)</i></p> |
| | <p><i>Probably one reason for the brevity of this Epistle is the Apostle's preference to _____ rather than write further.</i></p> <p><i>(visit the church)</i></p> |

Home Study Exercise

Basic activity (Levels 1, 2, and 3). After reading the study guide text, answer the following questions.

1. What caused the theory of two Johns to arise? _____

2. Who was probably the author of 2 John? _____

3. To whom was 2 John addressed? _____

4. What was the purpose of 2 John? _____
5. How is 2 John similar to and different from other first century letters? _____

6. What is the truth emphasized in 2 John? _____

7. What caused the commandment of love to be emphasized? _____

8. How did the travelling teachers go beyond the teaching of Christ as set forth by the Apostle?

9. How should Christians treat heretical teachers? _____
10. Who wrote 3 John? _____
11. What was the purpose of 3 John? _____

12. What was the relation of Gaius and John? _____
13. Who were the strangers mentioned in verse 5? _____
14. Who was Diotrephes? _____
15. Who was Demetrius? _____

Supplementary activity (Levels 2 and 3). Read pages 139-173 in Alexander and answer the following questions.

1. Whom does Alexander believe "the elder" to be?
2. Why were 2 and 3 John written?
3. Who was the "elect lady and her children"?
4. Who were the antichrists that endangered the church?
5. What were the five counts against Diotrephes?

Advanced activity (Level 3)

Using 2 and 3 John, write a church policy regarding visiting teachers which would be applicable to your church.

Seminar Discussion

1. Who was the author of 2 and 3 John?
2. Why were 2 and 3 John written?
3. Why did John emphasize the commandment of love?
4. Who were the antichrists that threatened the fellowship of the church?
5. Who were Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius?
6. What should be the church's attitude towards visiting teachers?