

New European Commentary

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## 2 John

*:1 The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not I only, but also all they that know the truth-* John saw the faithful churches to whom he was writing as those who had been faithful to the Gospel he had preached to them, as outlined in the Gospel of John. He had recorded there the promise that "You will know the truth" (Jn. 8:32), and he writes in his letters to a community "who have come to know the truth", i.e. who had fulfilled and obeyed the Gospel of Jesus which he had preached to them initially. For "the truth" is a common Johannine title for the Lord Jesus. "In truth" is equivalent to how Paul might write "in the Spirit" or "in Christ". For it is John who has told us of the gift of the Spirit to every believer, calling it "the spirit of truth", or as Paul would say, "the spirit of Christ". "Know" likewise is understood in John not as theoretical, doctrinal knowledge, but as perception and relationship of and with a person, the Lord Jesus, and not a set of theologies.

"Lady" is *kyria* and I suggest this refers to an actual sister, Kyria. It is not the usual word for "lady". Her "children" referred to her converts. John was her "elder" in that he had converted her; and she now had developed her own house church. Her "house" (:10) refers to her house church; the "your" in :10 is grammatically female. John passes on greetings from another chosen sister, left anonymous, and *her* converts (:13). So John's preaching of the Gospel had led to the development of house churches, those who had read or heard his preaching of the Gospel which we have transcribed in the Gospel of John. And two of them were run by women; 3 John is addressed to another house church, led by Gaius. These women may have been like Lydia, women of wealth who were converted and their household members followed suit. There are various frescoes and other archaeological evidences of female house churches, with wall paintings of women distributing the bread and wine at communion services etc. Such things were radical in first century society, and led to Christianity being characterized by its critics as a woman's religion. The Gospel today likewise appeals to the marginalized and those deprived of meaning and significance by society.

*:2 For the truth's sake which abides in us, and shall be with us for ever-* In John's thought, "the truth" is the Lord Jesus in the form of His Spirit, "the spirit of truth", and he uses the term in the same sense as Paul often uses the term "in Christ" or "in the Spirit". "The truth" is what "abides in us", but it is the spirit ["of truth"] which abides in us (1 Jn. 3:24). It will be with us "for ever" in that the gift of the Spirit "abides with you for ever" (Jn. 14:16). That promise had been made when the Lord was about to physically leave the believers, yet He promised that the gift of the Spirit in their hearts would mean that in fact they had His presence, through the Spirit, ever with them. The allusion to the Comforter promise yet again indicates that the Comforter, the gift of the Spirit, was promised not just to the first disciples but to all who should afterward believe, even though the Comforter had special relevance and manifestation in a unique way to the eleven disciples who first received the promise.

*: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-* "Grace" is a term often associated in the New Testament with the gift of the Spirit, and peace is peace with God through His mercy upon our sins. But this was no standard greeting; it comes not in the first verse as we might expect if that is all it is. It follows on from the reminder that they had received the Spirit, through which all these things are mediated. And John includes himself in the blessing alluded to- "with us", not "with you" as we would expect were this just a standard greeting.

*:4 I rejoice greatly that I have found some of your children walking in truth, even as we received commandment from the Father-* This is a case of seeing the glass half full rather than half empty; he rejoices that "some" of her converts were walking "in truth", or as Paul puts it, "in Christ". Some had fallen away; but some had remained, and that for him was wonderful.

John's greatest joy was that his converts, and his convert's converts, 'walked in truth', they 'walked after [the Father's] commandments' (2 Jn. 4,6). Paul likewise speaks of how his converts are his "joy and crown". They walked in life honest to themselves and to the Father, and walked "in truth" in that they walked in "the spirit of truth", in step with the leadership of the Spirit, walking in the Spirit as Paul would put it (Rom. 8:1; Gal. 5:16,25). Walking or living 'in truth' is thus put for living a life pleasing to God as guided by the Spirit within us. It surely doesn't mean that we simply live our lives holding on to the same intellectual understanding of doctrines which we had at our baptism. We 'keep' the commandments by 'doing' them (1 Jn. 2:3 cp. 5:2), not by merely holding to a true theoretical definition of them. There is so much more to walking in truth than this. We rightly emphasize the need for true doctrine; but the issue of this in practice is that true doctrine leads to a true life, a life true to God, to our brethren, to ourselves, in the power of the Spirit of truth. John parallels walking in the light with walking in the truth (1 Jn. 1:7; 2 Jn. 4); and yet Jn. 3 defines the true light as ultimately the light of the crucified Christ and the Spirit given as a result of that death (Jn. 7:39). To live life self-analytically in the shadow of the cross, of Him as He was there, is the only way to walk in the spirit of truth. This is the true life; to merely hold certain interpretations of Scripture in intellectual purity is not all there is to 'walking in truth' or 'in the light'. This kind of truth sets us free (Jn. 8:31,32); for where the spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free (2 Cor. 3:17). Discerning the correctness of sound exposition will not of itself bring any freedom. But living a life that we know broadly corresponds to the image of the crucified Jesus and under the influence of His Spirit will give a freedom unknown in any other sphere of human experience.

*:5 And now lady, I urge you not as though I write a new commandment, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another-* The newness of the commandment was to love one another as the Lord has loved us (Jn. 13:34; 1 Jn. 3:23). We wonder why she needed 'urging'; the need to love each other as the Lord loved us is so huge, that it is unsurprising that exhortation was required to remember how fundamentally important it was. This was what had been heard "from the beginning", a phrase used in John's Gospel for the beginning of the Lord's ministry (see on Jn. 1:1). Or perhaps John refers to the beginning of his encounter with Kyria; the commandment to love as the Lord loved was characteristic of the message he first preached, and which had first been preached right at the beginning of the Lord's ministry. The loss of such *agape* love was a problem in Ephesus, where the first *agape* had been lost (Rev. 2:4). Life hardens people, and we constantly need that call back to the spirit of the Lord's love, rather than allowing familiarity with the body of Christ to lead us to disrespect them.

*:6 And this is love, that we should walk after His commandments. This is the commandment, even as you heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it-* This speaks of the commandment which we readers received "from the beginning". But "the beginning" in John frequently if not always refers to the 'beginning' or [Gk.] 'first association' which the twelve disciples had with the Lord Jesus. Again, we are spoken of as if we are them, and their experiences were ours. Those twelve men who walked around Palestine with their Lord are symbols of us all. There is a continuity in Luke-Acts between "the disciples" who followed the Lord, and "the disciples" as a title for all the Christian believers. We are their continuation. Or John could also have in view his first preaching of the Gospel to Kyria; whereby we can understand that the up front bottom line of John's first preaching of the Gospel was a call to self-sacrificial love. Not theology but the call to love as the Lord loved His people in the death of the cross.

The "commandments" plural are comprehended in a singular commandment; and as noted elsewhere (see on Jn. 14:15; 1 Jn. 2:3), the reference is to the singular, fundamental commandment to love as the Lord loved us. This was what the Lord had preached from "the beginning" of His ministry (see on Jn. 1:1), and what John had likewise preached up front at the "beginning" of his preaching to Kyria. It is this principle of loving as the Lord loved us, to death on the cross, which is the light in which we should walk, deciding all issues in the light of His example and its imperative to us.

*:7 For many deceivers have gone out into the world, especially those that do not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist-* The "for" connects the warning against false teaching with the call back to *agape* love in :5,6. The end result of understanding that the Lord was of our nature is love, love as He loved. I suggested on 1 Jn. 4 and 5 that John's communities were up against the problem of Judaist infiltrators (also in Gal. 2:4 and in the churches Paul founded). They did not "confess" Jesus as Christ, lest they be put out of the synagogue (Jn. 9:22). Yet they had entered into the Christian churches, with an agenda of bringing them to Judaism and destroying their faith in Jesus as the Messiah. They had come up with the idea that the Lord was not really fully human, or that the Jewish Messiah was not to be a person "in the flesh". The ideas of deceit and "antichrist" are elsewhere associated by John with the Judaist system. These people were not therefore sincere Christians who genuinely misunderstand some Bible verses. These deceivers were out to deceive, and had gone out into the [Jewish] world as part of a conscious program of deception of Christians. Heb. 10:5 uses the same phrase for how the Lord 'went out into the world'. They were false, imitation Christs, which is the idea of 'anti' Christ.

That we can't be secret believers is brought out here. Anyone who does not confess publicly that Jesus came in the flesh is described by John as a deceiver and even anti-Christ. The French [Segond version] is clearest: "ne declarent pas publiquement". Whilst the passage is open to a number of interpretations, in our context the point perhaps is that to secretly believe in Christ isn't possible- it must in some way be declared publicly or else we are "deceivers". The Judaist infiltrators did not confess Jesus as Christ publicly lest they be cast out of Jewish society (Jn. 9:22); and this was the evidence, John says, that they were not of the Spirit of Jesus and were frauds, false Christians.

We may wonder why John is at such pains to point out that Christ "came in the flesh", and why he pronounced anathema upon those who denied that (2 Jn. 7-9). It seems to me that his converts had come up against Jewish attempts to re-interpret Jesus in terms of apostate

Jewish thinking about Angels and the whole nature of existence, the kind of heresy battled against in Hebrews and Colossians. Take Jewish views of the Angels who appeared to Abraham. Josephus says they "gave him to believe that they did eat" (*Antiquities* 1.197); Philo claimed that "though they neither ate nor drank, they gave the appearance of both eating and drinking" (*Abraham* 118). The Bible states simply that they ate. And that Jesus likewise ate after His resurrection. John emphasizes that the Lord Jesus had been fully tangible, the disciples touched and felt Him (1 Jn. 1:1-4); and that His death was equally real (1 Jn. 1:7; 2:2; 4:10; 5:6-9). And he presses the point that this is what had been believed "from the beginning", indicating that already new ideas were coming into the Christian communities about the nature of Jesus. This of itself shows that the whole issue of who Jesus is *does* matter; that the Christ was and is the *real* Christ was for John crucially important, as it is for me. Hence this book. The inspired apostle didn't simply shrug off these new ideas as well meaning misunderstandings. He speaks against them in the toughest possible terms.

:8 *Look to yourselves, that we do not lose the things which we have done but that we receive a full reward-* The letter is addressed to Kyria personally, the hostess of the house church; and she is asked to look to her converts, that they do not lose the spiritual position to which they had attained. We see here how a woman has pastoral responsibility, especially over her "children", her converts. The "yourselves" and "we" are different. The things "done" by John and his preaching team were the spiritual creation, under the Lord's influence, of Kyria and her house church of converts. This is our work for the Lord, what a man should 'do' in his life, the only labour that abides beyond our graves, the only career worth anything eternally.

But 'the things done' could also refer to their faith in the Lord Jesus. To believe in Him is described by John as a 'work' that has to be laboured at- with even more effort than that expended by the crowds who walked around the lake to get to Jesus and the free bread He appeared to be offering (Jn. 6:27; 2 Jn. 8). It is this 'labour', this hard mental effort to know Him and believe in Him, which will have a 'full reward' (2 Jn. 8). John here is alluding to the LXX of Ruth 2:12, where a 'full reward' is given to Ruth for working hard all day gleaning in the fields. It may be that this allusion was because "the elect lady" addressed by John was in fact a proselyte widow, like Ruth. But the point is, we have to *labour*, as much as one might work hard walking around a lake or gleaning in the field, in order to know the Lord Jesus Christ and bring others to that knowledge. The "full reward" may be reference to the fact that if we ourselves are saved but our converts or spiritual children fall away, then we have as it were lost the fullness of reward which there could have been for us. The fullness of reward is that not only we are saved, but our spiritual children too.

:9 *Whoever goes ahead and does not continue in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. He that continues in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son-* "Goes ahead" is a challenging term to translate. The idea is to step *pros*, beyond or around. The idea could be that the Judaist false teachers were suggesting that they had a new, more advanced teaching about the Lord; what is called the supposed 'depths' of the Jewish satan (Rev. 2:24). But I prefer the sense of stepping around, in that they were ignoring, sidestepping, the fundamental teaching of Christ that He would be their teacher through the Spirit; in this sense they were not left orphaned, without a teaching Rabbi after His departure. He was just as really with them, actively teaching them and guiding them into all truth through the Spirit (see on Jn. 14:18). This would read "the teaching of Christ" as a verb rather than a noun; they sidestepped the whole idea of Christ as our teacher, teaching us. Grammatically, the reference is to the teaching which He taught (as in Jn. 18:19; Rev. 2:14,15), rather than the doctrine which teaches about Him. John is writing to Jews as a Jew, and he is using a popular Jewish

phrase, "the doctrine of the King Messiah", or the Messiah's Talmud (*Bereshit Rabba*, sect. 98. fol. 85. 3), the teaching by Messiah.

Those who abide in Him are those in whom His Spirit abides, as John has emphasized throughout all his letters. The Spirit is the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of truth which teaches us in the place of His personal presence as Rabbi of the early disciples during His ministry. Those who abide in Him have Him, and thereby His Father. So the idea is not so much that we receive a body of theology, of doctrine, at baptism- are to hold on to it until our deathbeds. Instead we are to abide in Him, whereby His Spirit shall be our teacher, ever opening new truths to us as we are guided by this "spirit of truth" into "all truth". This is a subtle but fundamental difference, and the usage of the word "doctrine" in the AV has confused it.

And yet the more traditional reading of the passage still has some merit. John writes that to confess Jesus Christ as having come in the flesh, to acknowledge His true humanity, is related to walking after His commandments (2 Jn. 6,7). And this perhaps is why John can say that it is a 'going ahead', a sin, a "transgression" according to some translations, to not abide in the doctrine of a human Jesus (2 Jn. 9). Why should it be 'sinful' to hold a theological misunderstanding? Surely God cannot hold people morally culpable for genuine misinterpretation? Perhaps the answer lies in looking at it from a different angle. The purpose of doctrine is to elicit a Godly way of life. To refuse to believe in the real, human Jesus is actually a way of justifying our wrong behaviour, of hiding away from the challenge that *His* humanity is to *us* as His fellow human beings- to transform our personalities after the pattern of His. To believe the doctrine of a human Jesus who was nonetheless God manifest in human flesh empowers us not to sin; through this real and human Christ we have forgiveness and inspiration in the life that is in Him. This is why doctrine about Him matters- because if believed properly, it empowers a Christ-like life. This perspective helps us likewise understand what is fundamental doctrine, and what isn't. Any idea or theory or interpretation that doesn't have the potential to change our lives in practice just... isn't worth arguing about. See on 1 Jn. 5:5.

:10 *If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not welcome him into your house and give him no greeting-* The Judaist infiltrators were itinerant preachers, turning up at Christian house churches and wanting to teach. The whole of 1 Jn. 4 has warned about these people, with their false claims to Holy Spirit possession, who did not openly confess the Lord as Messiah and God's Son; see notes there. Kyria was to not let these people influence her house church.

:11 *For he that gives him greeting partakes in his evil works-* As explained on :7, the people in view are not sincere Christians who misunderstood things here and there in their theology. For that is true of us all. Instead, the reference is to the Judaist infiltrators who had a specific mission to destabilize and destroy the Christian churches. These are the "evil works" in view; and not genuine misinterpretation. That sort of thing is not appropriately described by the term "evil works". The implication is that *good* works are inspired by a true understanding of the Lord's humanity, and evil works by a refusal to accept this teaching. The tests of genuineness which John commanded centred around two simple things: Do those who come to you hold true understanding of the nature of Jesus; and do they love as He loved us to death on a cross. The two things go together. And they are a fair test even today. For where there is no love, the true doctrine of Jesus is not truly believed, no matter how nicely it is expressed in words and writing.

:12 *Having many things to write to you, I would not write them with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and to speak face to face, that your joy may be made full-* Paul's use of letter writing was perhaps analogous to our use of the internet. He says time and again that he's writing a letter, but he sees it as a poor substitute for the face to face contact he would prefer (Rom. 15:14-33; 1 Cor. 4:14-21; Gal. 4:12-20; 1 Thess. 2:17-3:13). John here says the same (2 Jn. 12; 3 Jn. 14). The fullness of joy envisioned upon their meeting is clearly a reference to the fullness of joy which was to result from possessing the Comforter (Jn. 15:11; 16:24). Perhaps John had the power to give the Spirit, to fill up other believers with it, maybe by the laying on of hands.

:13 *The children of your elect sister salute you-* John passes on greetings from another chosen sister, left anonymous, and *her* converts, who would have felt close to the church of Kyria, who were also converts of a woman. See on :1.