

The Second and Third Letters of John

by Joe Neil Clayton
Revised April 2010



Preface to the Second and Third Epistles of John

The authenticity of these short letters was debated fiercely for many years after the death of John the Apostle by those who set the standards for the acceptance of inspired Scripture. The famous commentator, Adam Clarke, suggests that this may have been caused by the addresses of the letters to obscure persons, "the elect lady," and "Gaius." He speculates that the manuscripts may have remained in the hands of these two families for a period of time, rather than distributed for general reading.

Another reason for the delay in including them in the Canon (the collection of inspired writings), Clarke speculates, is that the examiners had to wade through many forgeries in the early days of the church. He writes, "We have the names of at least seventy-five gospels which were offered to, and rejected by, the Church; besides Acts of Peter, Acts of Paul and Thecla, Third Epistle to the Corinthians, Epistle to the Laodiceans, Book of Enoch, etc., some of which have come down to the present time, but are convicted of forgery by the sentiment, the style, and the doctrine included."

The strongest evidence of the authenticity of 2nd and 3rd John is in the doctrinal content. As the 1st epistle warned against anti-Christian dogmas, exhorted the readers to mutual love, and obedience to commands as an evidence of love, we also find these divinely inspired sentiments in the 2nd epistle. The 3rd epistle rings true, also, because of its commendation of the support of John's emissaries by Gaius, and its admonitions against the church tyrant, Diotrephes. At the least, let it be observed that 2nd and 3rd John depart in no way from the teaching to be found in 1st John, or the remainder of the New Testament.

The character of these chatty letters is readily recognizable to modern correspondents; they are brief letters containing little in the way of substantive teaching, but take the form of greetings, or memos.

The 1st epistle is judged to be general in its application, and intended to be distributed. The 2nd and 3rd epistles differ, in that they are judged by many scholars to be "personal letters," announcing plans in both instances for John to visit them. Many such letters may have been written by various Apostles and Prophets of the Lord that are not preserved. The fact that these were divinely preserved indicates that God intended for them to form an important part of the New Testament Scripture, and worthy of our study.

The date of these epistles, and the places from which they were sent, are also matters causing a great amount of speculation. It is of no consequence as to their timing and origination, since there is no internal evidence, nor any reliable external evidence on these matters. We must therefore concentrate our study on what is important; the doctrinal content of the messages.

The authorship of these letters has also been disputed, but the conclusion reached by many scholars is that the style and content of the letters connects them closely to the 1st letter of John. Believers can rely on the content of the letters as evidence of their

authenticity, even if John the Apostle is not the author.

A Study of the Second Letter of John

TEXT: 1 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 abides in us, and it shall be with us for ever: 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 your children walking in truth, even as we received commandment from the Father.

COMMENTS:

(Verses 1 and 2) John titles himself "elder" in this letter, and the one to follow. However, most commentators speculate that he is using the term simply to refer to his old age. This is based on suppositions about the date of the letter (Clarke dates it around AD 85), and on the supposition that Apostles did not lower themselves to serve in the office of Presbyter in the early church. Most denominational commentators are captive to the traditional notion that modern religious leaders derive their authority from the principle of apostolic succession, having been ordained by the "laying on of hands" from others that have been similarly ordained. They believe that this line of "succession" connects them all the way back to the Apostles. There is no Scripture which supports this presumption. Most Bible commentators also believe that all the offices of the church are distinct from each other (and often listed in their descending order of importance as Apostles, bishops, elders, pastors, and deacons). However, this supposition is faulty, because the New Testament recognizes no distinction between Bishops (overseers), Elders and Pastors (shepherds). See all three titles in Acts 20:17, 28 (the title shepherd is found in the Greek verb, POIMEN, translated "to feed" in the King James Version). Though it is plausible that John may have been referring to his age by calling himself "elder," by contrast Peter refers to himself as a "fellow elder," serving in like manner with those who were instructed by him in their duties as officers in the church (1 Peter 5:1-4). In this passage, also, the words elder, overseer, and shepherd are used to refer to the same group of men. Therefore, John may also have been an "official" elder in some church (perhaps Jerusalem), as well as an Apostle.

The one to whom this letter is addressed could be a person, or a congregation. Both opinions have some merit. If a person, the term "elect lady" could be a pseudonym, similar to the name "Theophilus," found in the addresses of Luke and Acts. That Greek name is interpreted, "friend of God," and John's addressee could have had the reputation of being an "elect lady," especially as her reputation caused both John and those who "know the truth" to love her. If, on the other hand, this name is used to refer to a congregation of the Lord's people, we could justify that opinion by the fact that the Greek word church, EKKLESIA, is a feminine noun, and is referred to as the "bride of

Christ" (John 3:29; Revelation 19:7, 21:2, 9). This opinion may be reinforced by the fact that John implies in Vs. 4 that only some of her children were walking as they should. This is the status quo in most congregations. Many are strong believers and obedient, but some fall short of this ideal. Neither of these opinions will materially hinder or enhance our understanding of the teaching of this letter.

In his reference to those who "know the truth," John adds, "...for the truth's sake which abides in us, and it shall be with us for ever." This sentiment agrees well with what the Apostle wrote in 1 John 2:24, 27. It is comforting to know that God will preserve His word (Mark 13:31), that truth is in His word (John 17:17), and that we will always be able to consult it to guide us and protect us from error.

(Verse 3) The combination of "grace, mercy, and peace," used here by John, is identical to the greetings sent by Paul to Timothy (1 Timothy 1:2; 2 Timothy 1:2). There is a difference in usage, however. Paul directs his greeting to Timothy alone, while John includes himself in the benefits of these blessings from God and Christ by saying, "Grace, mercy, peace shall be with us..."

(Verse 4) John rejoices in the knowledge that "some" of the children of the elect lady are walking in truth, according to divine commandment. This sentiment is also found in his 3rd letter, in which he says, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (3 John 4). In that place, he calls the objects of his joy, "my children," indicating that he might have been personally involved in the conversion of Gaius. (Compare 1 Corinthians 4:15; 1 Timothy 1:8, and Philemon 10.)

TEXT: 5 And now I beseech you, lady, not as though I wrote to you a new 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 you should walk in it.

COMMENTS:

(Verses 5 and 6) In similar phrasing, these verses repeat for this new addressee what John has written in his first letter (1 John 2:7-11, etc.), and in his "gospel" (John 13:34, 15:12, etc.). These are the sentiments that have earned John the traditional title, "Apostle of Love." Yet, it can be readily observed that brotherly love is consistently connected by John to the keeping of commandments (John 14:15, 23-24; 1 John 5:2-3). This could just as easily identify him as the "Apostle of Commandment Keeping."

TEXT: 7 For many deceivers have gone forth into the world, even they that do not confess that Jesus Christ comes in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. 8 Look to yourselves, that you do not lose the things which we have wrought, but that you receive a full reward. 9 Whosoever goes onward and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God: he that abides in the teaching, the same has both the Father and the Son. 10 If any one comes unto you, and does not bring this teaching, do

not receive him into your house, and give him no greeting: 11 for he that gives him greeting partakes in his evil works.

COMMENTS:

(Verses 7-8) The multitude of deceivers who try to corrupt the truth is a frequent theme in the New Testament. Jesus referred to them in Matthew 7:15-20, 24:11, 24. Other references are found in 2 Peter 2:1, and 1 John 4:1. We can observe even today that many false teachers try to gather followers by pretension and deception (Acts 20:28-30). They will collect those who are gullible, who do not love truth, and who find pleasure in unrighteousness (2 Thessalonians 2:8-12). Those who seek and love the truth have an advantage over those who are duped by error, however, because the truth has been preserved, and is available to all who seek it.

In his previous letter, John identifies the "antichrist" as one who denies that Jesus is the Christ. In this letter, he warns of that special type of "antichrist" who will not confess that the Christ came in the flesh. Certain Greek philosophers, whose ideas eventually led to the founding of the Gnostic sects of the 2nd Century, proclaimed that flesh is inherently evil, and so denied that anyone could be formed of flesh, and still be sinless, as Jesus was proclaimed to be (Compare John 8:46, 2 Corinthians 5:21, Hebrews 5:15, and 1 Peter 2:22.). Yet, Jesus was "born of a woman" (Galatians 4:4), and referred to himself often as "son of man." It was His humanity that enabled him to conquer Satan through death (Hebrews 2:14), to be a succoring high priest (Hebrews 2:17-18), and to be a mediator between God and man (1 Timothy 2:5). It is extremely important, then, that He be confessed both as the Christ (deity), and as coming in flesh (humanity). To receive a "full reward," we must not reject either of these essential truths (compare 2 Corinthians 13:5 and 1 Thessalonians 5:21).

(Verses 9-11) Deviations from the teaching of Christ have tragic consequences. To "go onward," or go beyond that teaching causes us to forfeit our relationship with God. Only by abiding in the teaching of Christ can we have both the Father and the Son. The "teaching of Christ" here is conceived by some as the "teaching about Christ," based on the previous condemnation of those who do not confess that he came in the flesh. Rather, the meaning is more compatible with John's statement in 1 John 2:6 "...he that says he abides in him ought himself also to walk even as he walked." Jesus lived what He taught, and it is essential to limit ourselves to what He taught. Adding to His teaching is self-condemning. (Compare 2 Timothy 2:16-18, and Titus 1:10-11.)

Not only must we avoid going beyond what Jesus teaches, but we must not give moral or monetary support to any others who do so. If we do, we share in their pernicious work. This requires us to know the truth, so that we can discern who is teaching error. The Bereans of Acts 17:11 were not reluctant to test the teaching of Paul through daily study of the Scriptures. By their study, they were convinced that Paul was using the prophetic Scripture properly when he asserted that it applied to Jesus of Nazareth. (Compare Acts 18:28.) By this same procedure, we may confirm the veracity

of true teachers, and also expose the error of all teachers who do not confine themselves to the "teaching of Christ." We must acknowledge, however, that all we really know of the teaching of Christ comes to us through the Apostles and prophets of the New Testament (compare 2 Peter 3:1-2).

TEXT: 12 Having many things to write unto you, I would not write them 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 your elect sister salute you.

COMMENTS:

(Verse 12) In several of the epistles of the New Testament we find declarations of intention to visit the addressees (see Romans 1:10; 1 Corinthians 16:5; and 1 Thessalonians 2:18). John saved his precious paper and ink, knowing that he would soon see them face to face, and that this would both give him joy, while making their joy full.

(Verse 13) The salutation found here is compatible with many others written in the latter portions of the epistles (compare Romans 16:1-16, etc.), but the question regarding the identity of the "lady" addressed in this letter is revived by the mention of her "sister." Is she a person, or a congregation of believers?

A Study of the Third Letter of John

TEXT: 1 The elder unto Gaius the beloved, whom I love in truth. 2 Be-loved, I pray that in all things you may prosper and be in health, even as your soul prospers. 3 For I rejoiced greatly, when brethren came and bore witness unto your truth, even as you walk in truth. 4 I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

COMMENTS:

(Verses 1-4) This letter is prompted, apparently, by the report of the brethren who had been sent out by John, and had now returned to him. They not only bore witness to the faithful actions of Gaius, but also revealed Diotrefes' obstinate rejection of them.

The Gaius to whom this letter is addressed could be one of several that are mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament. He could be the one from Macedonia, in Acts 19:29, or the "Gaius of Derbe," mentioned in Acts 20:4. Paul's host in Corinth, and the one he baptized there could be the same man (see Romans 16:23 and 1 Corinthians 1:14). Since there is no evidence in Scripture that John knew any of these other men by that name, it is possible that his correspondent is yet another Gaius. The name was very common in the Roman world of that time. Whoever he may have been, he is identified as a faithful Christian, and John seems to have had a very close relationship with him.

His commendation of Gaius' faithfulness to the truth expresses this.

To "walk in truth," as Gaius did, should be the goal of every Christian. It was the goal of the psalmist who wrote Psalm 86:11. Peter failed to walk in truth, when he practiced partiality during a visit to Antioch (Galatians 2:14). Jesus said, "I have come into the world that I should bear witness unto the truth. Every one that is of the truth hears my voice" (John 18:37).

TEXT: 5 Beloved, you are doing a faithful work in whatsoever you do toward them that are brethren and yet strangers; 6 who bare witness to your love before the church: whom you will do well to set forward on their journey worthily of God: 7 because that for the sake of the Name they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. 8 We therefore ought to welcome such, that we may be fellow-workers for the truth.

COMMENTS:

(Verses 5-8) From the sparse information of this letter, we can put together a reasonable scenario regarding Gaius' help of the emissaries of John. Christ sent forth workers, two by two, to precede Him (see Luke 10:1). Paul had "fellow-workers" whom he sent on various missions (Acts 19:22; 1 Corinthians 4:17). John must have sent some brethren on such a mission, hoping that the church of which Gaius was a member would assist them on their journey. When the church tyrant, Diotrephes, would not permit anyone to help, Gaius must have decided to support the brethren on his own. He may have been "cast out" of the local church for doing this, but he bowed to a higher authority. John commended his action by putting his apostolic sanction on individual support of evangelists. This example can be added to that of local church support of evangelists (see Philippians 4:15-17; and 2 Corinthians 11:7-8).

The men on this mission went forth in expectation of support from brethren, "taking nothing of the Gentiles." This illustrates the point that workers for the Lord are not to beg their way, like some religious workers today who expect some of their support to come from the public at large. (This is the practice of the Salvation Army, some Pentecostal churches, some mainline churches, and several of the oriental cults).

In the 2nd letter, John affirmed that support of those who "bring not this teaching" of Christ will involve the supporter in their evil work (2 John 10-11). Here, the support of faithful workers causes the supporter to share in work "for the truth."

TEXT: 9 I wrote somewhat unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loves to have the pre-eminence among them, does not receive us. 10 Therefore, if I come, I will bring to remembrance his works which he does, speaking foolishly against us with wicked words: and not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and them that would he forbids and casts them out of the church. 11 Beloved, do not imitate that which is evil, but that which is good. He that does good is of God: he that does evil has not seen God.

COMMENTS:

(Verses 9-10) These verses show that churches in the times of the Apostles also had problems with ambitious men in their leadership. Peter, in his instruction to elders, warned against "Lording it over" the brethren. They were to lead by good example, like shepherds (see 1 Peter 5:1-3). Members of churches who will allow a tyrant to rise among them, controlling decisions by force and rigor contrary to the rule of Scripture, are just as guilty of wrongdoing as the tyrant himself. The demon of ambition rose among some of the Apostles, and had to be put down by the Lord himself (see Matthew 23:10-12; and Luke 22:24-27). In this latter passage, Jesus shows the inversion of thought needed to teach us that a servant is greater than he who is served. A little child can be our model of greatness (see Matthew 18:1-4).

(Verse 11) John uses the poor example of Diotrephes to warn against following it. The simple principle stands that doing good is godly, and doing evil is devilish.

TEXT: 12 Demetrius has the witness of all men, and of the truth itself: yes, we also bear witness: and you know that our witness is true. 13 I had many things to write unto you, but I am unwilling to write them to you with ink and pen: 14 but I hope shortly to see you, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be unto you. The friends salute you. Salute the friends by name.

COMMENTS:

(Verse 12) The commendation of the man named Demetrius is one that all Christians should strive to obtain. Christ had a good report of this type (Luke 2:52), and elders are to be qualified on this basis (1 Timothy 3:7). There are things that we can all do, in order to have good reputations among men (see Romans 12:18; Philippians 4:5; Titus 3:2; Hebrews 12:14; and 1 Peter 2:17). Since so many years separate us from the time of the Apostles, we cannot gain personal testimony of our worthiness from John, or any of the other Apostles, except indirectly. Their commendations of others are examples of what we must do to gain a similar commendation. John asserts that his "witness" must be accepted as true, and Paul used the same tactic (Romans 9:1; 2 Corinthians 11:31; Galatians 1:20; and 1 Timothy 2:7). The worthy disciple, Gaius, would certainly accept the witness of John as true, and receive Demetrius on this reliable testimony.

(NOTE: This is certainly not the Demetrius who was a ringleader of the opposition against Paul in the region of Ephesus [Acts 19:23-41]. This was a common name in the Greek culture. Nothing else is said of the Demetrius mentioned here.)

(Verses 13-14) The end of this letter is almost a repeat of the ending of the 2nd letter. The most evident difference is in the last part of Verse 14, which is probably best interpreted, "The friends (here) salute you. Salute the friends (there) by name." The "salute" here, in the Greek word, is equivalent to a "salutation," or "greeting." Other letters from Apostles have similar endings (see Romans 16:1ff and 1 Peter 5:14).