

Resources Referred to in This Study (by author's last name)

The Epistles of John by Donald **Burdick** (1970)

"The Second Epistle of John" by Charles **Ryrie** in *The New Testament and Wycliffe Bible Commentary* (1971)

"The Second and Third Epistles of John" by Benjamin **Chapman** in *The Liberty Commentary on the New Testament* (1978)

The Epistles of John by I. Howard **Marshall** in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (1978)

"2 John" by Glenn **Barker** in Volume 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (1981)

"1 John"; "2 John"; "3 John" by Zane **Hodges** in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (1983)

"James and I-III John" by Simon **Kistemaker** in *New Testament Commentary* (1986)

The Letters of John by John **Stott** in *The Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (1988)

The Epistles of John: An Expositional Commentary by D. Edmond **Hiebert** (1991)

"1, 2, 3 John" by Daniel **Akin** in *The New American Commentary* (2001)

"1-3 John" by Robert **Yarbrough** in *The Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (2008)

Unless otherwise indicated, all Scriptural citations are from the NASB

Introduction to 2 John

(with corresponding discussion questions)

The book of 2 John is one of the eight New Testament books (Hebrews-Jude) that are commonly called the “General Epistles.” They are entitled such because they are believed to have been written to Christians in general, rather than to a particular church or churches or to a particular individual or individuals (as in the case of all thirteen of the “Pauline Epistles”).¹

Authorship

The fact that this epistle is entitled “2 John” is testament to the fact that the overwhelming majority of Christians throughout church history have considered the apostle John to be its human author. External evidence for the Johannine authorship of 2 John is not nearly as extensive as that for 1 John (not surprising, considering 2 John’s relative brevity). Kistemaker (p. 196) cites Irenaeus and Dionysius as two early church leaders who espoused Johannine authorship of 2 John. As with 1 John, it is internal evidence that decisively tips the scales in favor of Johannine authorship of 2 John. Assuming Johannine authorship of both the gospel of John and the epistle of 1 John, Johannine authorship of 2 John is inferred from the many similarities between the gospel of John, 1 John, and 2 John.²

Unlike 1 John, the writer of 2 John does identify himself. However, he does not do so by name. He identifies himself simply as “the elder”³ (verse 1; cf. Philemon 9 and 3 John 1). John went from being a disciple of John the Baptist to a follower of Jesus (John 1:35-37), eventually becoming one of the twelve apostles (Matthew 10:2-4). His father was Zebedee (Mark 1:19-20), his mother Salome (compare Matthew 27:56 with

¹According to this definition, “general epistle” is a misnomer as far as 2 John is concerned, 2 John likely having been written to a particular church in the Roman province of Asia under John’s oversight (see under “recipients” below). Marshall (p. 10) states in this regard: “The suggestion that the letter is written to Christians generally comes to grief on the clear indications that a concrete situation is envisaged.” Because so many of the so-called “general epistles” are in reality written to a specific audience, whether an individual (as in the case of 3 John), a church (as in the case of 2 John), or a collection of churches (as in the case of 1 and 2 Peter and 1 John), some prefer to refer to them as “non-Pauline epistles,” rather than “general epistles.”

²According to Hiebert (p. 278), more than half the content of 2 John is found in 1 John.

³“The author . . . must have been so well known to those he was writing to that the title ‘elder’ immediately identified him” (Barker, p. 361); “His identity was so well known and his authority so well recognized that he could use the title without needing to qualify or amplify it” (Stott, p. 42).

Mark 15:40).⁴ John was a fisherman by trade (Mark 1:19-20). We know he had at least one sibling, his older (since he is always listed first) brother, James (Mark 1:19).⁵ Christ nicknamed James and John “the sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17), no doubt due to their tempestuous natures, as evidenced in Luke 9:54. Peter, James, and John (fishing partners—Luke 5:10) comprised the “inner circle” among the Twelve (Mark 5:37, 9:2, and 14:33).⁶ John was one of the “pillars” of the early church (Galatians 2:9). Besides 2 John, John also wrote the epistles of 1 John and 3 John, the gospel of John, and Revelation. Most interpreters are of the opinion that, in his later years, John resided in Ephesus, overseeing the churches located in the Roman province of Asia (particularly the seven mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3), of which Ephesus was the capital.⁷ Kistemaker (p. 206) states in this regard: “The writer appears to have been a long-time resident in their area; he has taught and preached in their churches.” It is commonly believed that John was the last of the apostles to die, dying a natural death at the end of the 1st century A.D.

Recipients

In verse 1, John identifies his recipients as “the chosen lady and her children” (cf. verses 4 & 5). Interpreters are divided as to whether John is speaking literally of a Christian woman and her children (so Hiebert and Gromacki) or figuratively of a local church and its members (so Hodges, Stott, Kistemaker, Marshall, and Carson, Moo, and Morris).⁸ If so, John’s audience is most likely one of the local churches in the Roman province of Asia under his oversight (perhaps one of the seven mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3).

⁴Based on a comparison of Matthew 27:56 with John 19:25, it may be that Salome and Mary, the mother of Jesus, were sisters (this may be the reason why Christ asked John to look after his mother in John 19:25-27). If so, Jesus and John would have been cousins.

⁵James was martyred by Herod Agrippa I in 44 A.D. (Acts 12:2).

⁶John and Peter are often closely associated (John 18:15-16, 20:2-8, Acts 3:1-4:23, and 8:14-24).

⁷In both 2 John 1 and 3 John 1, John calls himself “the elder.” Though “elder” is one of the Scriptural titles for the office of pastor, John was probably using the term in a different sense to indicate his apostolic authority and oversight (cf. Peter’s similar designation in 1 Peter 5:1). Notice that he calls himself “the” (not “an”) elder. Assuming John was the only living apostle at the time, this designation would be entirely appropriate.

⁸Support for this position includes reference to the body of Christ in terms of a woman (Ephesians 5:22-33) and reference to local churches in terms of a woman (2 Corinthians 11:2 and 1 Peter 5:13).

Place of Composition

It is commonly believed that in his later years John functioned as an overseer of a group of churches in the Roman province of Asia, with the church at Ephesus being predominant (Ephesus was the capital of Asia). According to tradition, John resided in Ephesus. If so, it is likely that he wrote the epistle of 2 John from his residence there.

Date of Composition

The overwhelming majority of interpreters date the writing of 2 John in the later years of the 1st century A.D.⁹ If so, 2 John was one of the last biblical books written. The five Johannine books were likely the last five biblical books to be written and were probably written in the order in which they appear in our New Testaments: gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation.

Occasion

Apparently, some of the members of the local church to whom 2 John was written had paid a visit to John in Ephesus (verse 4). Their return afforded John an opportunity to send a letter with them to their local church. It may be that these visitors informed John that false teachers in the region had arrived in their area (verse 7), prompting John to write what he wrote. The arrival of such false teachers in the Ephesian region is in keeping with Paul's previous warning to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:29-30 (cf. Paul's words to Timothy, at that time the pastor of the church in Ephesus, in 2 Timothy 3:1-7 and 4:3-4). These false teachers were "many" (verse 7; cf. 1 John 2:18 and 4:1). Who exactly were they and what did they teach?

From statements made within the epistle itself (see verses 7 and 9), it is clear that these false teachers taught a perverted Christology (Christology being the doctrine of Christ), particularly in regards to the incarnation of Christ (verse 7).¹⁰ Interpreters are divided as to the precise identification of these heretics. One possibility is that they were Gnostics. The Gnostics held to an absolute dichotomy between the material and the immaterial, viewing the first as evil and the second as good. Hence, Christ could not have taken on human flesh, because the human body, being material, was evil. Since most historians are of the opinion that Gnosticism did not fully bloom until the 2nd century A.D., it is unlikely that these false teachers were Gnostics (furthermore, other aberrant teachings of the Gnostics receive no mention in 2 John). Another possibility is that these false

⁹Hodges (early 60s A.D.); Marshall (60s, 70s, 80s, or 90s A.D.); Hiebert (80-81 A.D.); Gromacki and *The NASB Study Bible* (85-95 A.D.); Barker and *The New Open Bible, Study Edition* (90 A.D.); Carson, Moo, and Morris (early 90s A.D.); Kistemaker (90-95 A.D.).

¹⁰"Incarnation" literally means "in flesh." It is the doctrine that teaches that the second person of the Godhead, God the Son, took on human flesh, thus becoming theanthropic (from *theos*, the Greek word for "God" and *anthropos*, the Greek word for "man")/the God-man. See John 1:14.

teachers were Docetists. Docetism (from the Greek verb, *dokeo*, meaning “to appear or seem to be”) taught that Christ only appeared to be human. Yet another possibility is that these false teachers were Cerinthianists. Named after Cerinthus, a contemporary of John who, like John, resided in Ephesus, Cerinthianism taught that rather than the divine taking on the human, the human took on the divine. More specifically, Cerinthus taught that the human Jesus became divine at his baptism (the Christ spirit entered Jesus), then lost his divinity just prior to his crucifixion (the Christ spirit left Jesus).¹¹

In the final analysis, a precise identification of the heretics is beyond our reach.

Purpose

John’s purpose for writing 2 John appears to be to warn one of the local churches under his oversight to be on guard against the false teachers on the prowl in Asia (verse 8), as well as to instruct them how to respond should any of these false teachers seek to make inroads into their congregation (verse 10).

Outline/Structure

2 John (with some minor variation) conforms to the typical epistolary pattern of the day: an introduction/salutation (verses 1-3) which names the writer (verse 1) and recipients (verse 1), extending a greeting to the second (verse 3); the body of the letter (verses 4-11)¹²; and a conclusion/benediction (verses 12-13).

Outstanding Features of 2 John

1. Its brevity. Based on number of verses (13), 2 John is the shortest book in the Bible. However, it is actually longer (in the original) than 3 John (though 3 John has 14 verses). Thus, 2 John is actually the second shortest book in the Bible.

Other Resources Consulted for This Lesson

An Introduction to the New Testament by D. A. Carson, Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris

New Testament Survey by Robert Gromacki

The New Open Bible, Study Edition

The Zondervan NASB Study Bible

¹¹Adding credence to the position that the heresy John is combatting in 1 John is Cerinthianism is the historical anecdote related by Polycarp and recorded by Irenaeus: “There are also those who heard from him [Polycarp] that John, the disciple of the Lord, going to bathe at Ephesus, and perceiving Cerinthus within, rushed out of the bath-house without bathing, exclaiming, ‘Let us fly, lest even the bath-house fall down, because Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is within’” (Irenaeus, quoted by Kistemaker, p. 213).

¹²*The New Open Bible, Study Edition* divides the body of the epistle into two parts: 1) practice of the truth (verses 4-6) and 2) protection of the truth (verses 7-11).

Discussion Questions for Introduction to 2 John

1. Two prominent, interconnected concepts in the first half of 2 John are love (see verses 1, 3, 5, and 6) and truth (see verses 1, 2, 3, and 4). What connections are there between these two concepts?

Possible answers: both are characteristic of God, who is loving, 1 John 4:8 and 16, and true, Psalm 31:5, John 3:33, Romans 3:4, Titus 1:2, and Hebrews 6:18; if you truly love someone, you will be truthful with them/speak the truth to them, Ephesians 4:15; truth needs to be communicated in a loving manner/confrontation is to be caring, Ephesians 4:15

2. According to 2 John 4, if you love truth, what will be your response to it?

Suggested answer: rejoicing

According to 2 John 10, if you love truth, what will be your response to what is untrue?

Suggested answer: rejection—not unlike healthcare workers, who hate germs because they love health

3. In 2 John 4-6, John speaks of walking in the truth/doing the truth/practicing the truth, while in 2 John 7-11, he speaks of warring for the truth/defending the truth/protecting the truth. What connection might there be between these two concepts?

Possible answers: they are a both/and, not an either/or—we must both walk in the truth/do the truth/practice the truth and war for the truth/defend the truth/protect the truth; we must walk in the truth/do the truth/practice the truth before we can credibly war for the truth/defend the truth/protect the truth; warring for the truth/defending the truth/protecting the truth is a form of walking in the truth/doing the truth/practicing the truth

2 John

(with corresponding discussion questions)

INTRODUCTION/SALUTATION (verse 1-3)

John begins his second epistle with a salutation (verse 1-3), in which he identifies himself as the author (verse 1) and a local church under his oversight as the recipients (verse 1) and gives a greeting (verse 3).

Verse 1

The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth,

John calls himself simply “the elder” (cf. 3 John 1), a title indicative of his age, authority, and apostleship (for more on this designation, see under “authorship” in the introduction to 2 John). He identifies those to whom he is writing as “the chosen lady and her children.” As discussed under “recipients” in the introduction to 2 John, while this may be taken literally to refer to an actual first century Christian woman and her offspring, it is more likely figurative for a local church, one of the many in the Roman province of Asia under John’s oversight (likely one of the Asian churches mentioned in Revelation 2 & 3), and its members. A local church can be described as “chosen” (cf. 1 Peter 5:13 and 2 John 13) in that it is composed of those who have been chosen by God for salvation (cf. Ephesians 1:4 and 2 Thessalonians 2:13). John concludes verse one by expressing his true love for his readers (“whom I¹³ love in truth¹⁴”), a love shared by many others (“not only I, but also all who know¹⁵ the truth”).

¹³The “I” in this sentence is emphatic. The original literally reads: “whom I I love in the truth,” the “I” being repeated for emphasis. Some interpreters are of the opinion that this is John’s way of saying that he, unlike the false teachers, truly loved his readers. Stott (p. 205) says that this is John’s way of giving a “side glance” to the heretics.

¹⁴The Greek prepositional phrase translated “in truth” can be taken adverbially to mean “truly” (so Barker, pp. 366-367).

¹⁵Commenting on the Greek verb translated “know” in this verse, Marshall (p. 62) rightly states: “Such knowing goes beyond merely knowing facts or doctrines to a positive acceptance of the truth and commitment to it.” It is a relational knowledge. “Know” is a perfect tense verb in the original, suggesting that those who know the truth continue to know it (one could translate: “have known and continue to know”), implying that true believers persevere in the faith.

Verse 2

for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever:

John now gives the underlying reason why (“for the sake of”; NIV: “because of”) he and so many other fellow believers love the believers to whom he is writing, namely, a common denominator, the truth that abides in every believer (“the truth which abides in us”).¹⁶ Believing the truth results in regeneration, which results in love for the brethren (see 1 Peter 1:22). Underlying John’s reasoning here may be any one or all of the following syllogisms: 1) the Holy Spirit abides in every believer (1 Corinthians 6:19), and the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of truth (John 14:17, 15:26, 16:13, and 1 John 5:6); therefore, the truth abides in every believer. See especially John 14:16-17 in this regard; 2) Christ abides in every believer (John 6:56), and Jesus Christ is the embodiment of the truth (John 14:6); therefore, the truth abides in every believer; 3) the Word of God abides in every believer (1 John 2:14), and the Word of God is truth (Psalm 119:160, John 17:17, 2 Corinthians 6:7, 2 Timothy 2:15, and James 1:18); therefore, the truth abides in every believer. John’s final statement in this verse is that the truth “will be with us forever.” The truth that abides in every believer never “moves out.” This is an implicit affirmation of the biblical truth that a true believer will persevere in the faith.

Verse 3

Grace, mercy and peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.

The typical secular salutation in New Testament days ended with a greeting of one word, “greetings” (Greek *chairein*) (see Acts 15:23, 23:26, and James 1:1). Most New Testament writers “Christianized” it by saying “grace” (Greek *charis*) instead, along with “peace¹⁷” (so Paul in Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 2 Thessalonians 1:2, Titus 1:4, and Philemon 3; so also Peter in 1 Peter 1:2 and 2 Peter 1:2; so also John in Revelation 1:4), or along with “peace” and “mercy” (so Paul in 1 Timothy 1:2 and 2 Timothy 1:2; so also John here in 2 John 3).¹⁸ John’s greeting here in verse 3 is unusual in two respects: first, it is three-fold (grace, mercy, and peace¹⁹), rather than the typical two-fold

¹⁶Stott (p. 206) makes a perceptive, practical point at this point: “Since Christian love is founded upon Christian truth, we shall not increase the love which exists between us by diminishing the truth.”

¹⁷“Peace” was the typical Jewish greeting (Luke 10:5).

¹⁸Jude’s greeting is the only one that does not include “grace”; rather, his has “mercy,” “peace,” and “love” (Jude 2).

¹⁹Various descriptions have been given for the three. Marshall (p. 63) describes

(grace and peace); and second, it is the only one in which the greeting is not so much a wish as it is a statement of fact. He does not say may these three be with his readers, but that they “will be” (no doubt to parallel the “will be with us” at the end of the previous verse). As in so many other New Testament greetings (so the greetings in Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and Philemon), John identifies the source of the grace, mercy, and peace mentioned in his greeting as being both God the Father and God the Son.²⁰ John gives explicit testimony to the deity of Christ by adding that Jesus Christ is “the Son²¹ of the Father,” likely in order to counter the corrupt Christology of the false teachers. Grace, mercy, and peace operate in the sphere of truth and love (“in truth and love”). Truth and love are especially predominant early on in the epistle (truth 5 times in verses 1-4; love 4 times in verses 1-6). Speaking of the interrelationship between the two, Stott (p. 207) eloquently states: “Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth hard if it is not softened by love.”

BODY (verses 4-11)

In the body of the epistle, John exhorts his readers to practice the truth (verses 4-6) and to protect it (verses 7-11).

grace as “the love and favor shown freely to men by God,” mercy as “very much the same,” and peace as “the sum total of the spiritual blessings given to men by God in His grace and mercy.” Hiebert (pp. 294-295) describes grace as “the free and unmerited favor of God bestowed upon guilty and unworthy individuals in and through Jesus Christ,” mercy as “God’s pity and compassion for those in trouble and distress,” and peace as that which “flows from the experience of grace and mercy and denotes that inner sense of tranquility and well-being which is the sure result.” Stott (pp. 206-207) states that “peace indicates the character of salvation, mercy our need of it and grace God’s free provision of it in Christ.” Chapman (p. 1032) says that grace is “the favor of God towards sinners,” that mercy is “the compassion of God for us in our misery,” and that peace is “the resultant state of wholeness when sin and misery are removed.” Yarbrough (p. 336) says that “we may take the words as pointing to God’s unmerited favor to His people, his willingness to pardon their sin, and his abiding hand of blessing.” In describing the relationship between the three, one could say that grace and mercy are the causes of peace or that peace is the consequence of grace and mercy (i.e., grace and mercy are the root, while peace is the fruit).

²⁰A phenomenon that Marshall (p. 64) labels “binitarian.”

²¹In Hebraic thought, to say that one was a son of someone was to say that he was equivalent in essence with that someone. Thus, to call Jesus the “Son of God” is to say that He is God.

Verse 4

I was very glad to find some of your children walking in truth, just as we have received commandment to do from the Father.

As mentioned under “occasion” in the introduction to 2 John, it may be that some²² of the members of the church to whom John is writing this epistle had paid him a visit (in Ephesus?). John was overjoyed (“very glad”) to discover upon meeting these individuals that they were “walking in truth” (cf. Psalm 26:3, 86:11, and 3 John 3-4; cf. 1 John 1:7’s “walk in the Light”).²³ Their possession of the truth (verse 2) had led to their practice of the truth (verse 4; cf. “practice the truth” in 1 John 1:6); their creed was leading to deeds; their belief to their behavior; their doctrine to their duty. If one believes the truth, he is be living the truth.

Verse 5

Now I ask you, lady, not as though I were writing to you a new commandment, but the one which we have heard from the beginning, that we love one another.

In a very tender and tactful way, by requesting what he requires (“I ask you, lady”), John commands his readers to love one another (cf. 1 John 3:11, 23b, 4:7, and 21). After commending them for walking in truth (verse 4), he commands them to walk in love (verses 5 and 6). Notice that John includes himself in this (“we”). The love John is speaking of is *agape* love, doing²⁴ (cf. 1 John 3:18) what is best for another. The command to love others was not a new one²⁵, but an old one, one John’s readers had “heard from the beginning” (cf. 1 John 2:7 and 3:11), meaning from the beginning of their Christian experience.

²²There is some question as to the significance of the “some” in this verse. Is John saying that only some of the members of the church to whom he is writing were walking in truth, implying that the others were not? More likely, he is simply saying that he had met only some of their members, and those whom he had met were walking in truth, the implication being that everyone in the church was doing the same, those whom he had met being representative of the whole (so Hiebert and Marshall, as well as Gromacki).

²³A practical question to ask ourselves at this point is: What makes us “very glad”? Is it the fact that those around us are “walking in truth”? Does such a fact excite us? It should.

²⁴“Christian love belongs rather to the sphere of action than of emotion. It is not an involuntary, uncontrollable passion, but unselfish service undertaken by deliberate choice” (Stott, p. 209).

²⁵Though it was “new” in the sense that Jesus invested it with new significance by His demonstration of love. See John 13:34.

Verse 6

And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that you should walk in it.

As he did in his first epistle (in 1 John 2:5a and 5:2b-3a; cf. Exodus 20:6, Deuteronomy 5:10, 7:9, Nehemiah 1:5, Daniel 9:4, John 14:15, 21a, and 23a), John states that love for God is seen by obedience to God (“And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments”). From “commandments” (plural), John (as he does in 1 John 2:7) zeroes in on one particular “commandment” (singular), the command to love others (“the²⁶ commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning”; cf. verse 5). Love for others is evidence that we love God, because God commands us to love others, and doing what God says is evidence that we love Him.

²⁶John calls the command to love others “the commandment,” likely because it is the supreme command governing our relationship with other men, encapsulating the last six commandments in the Decalogue/Ten Commandments (just as the command to love God is the supreme command governing our relationship with Him, encapsulating the first four commandments in the Decalogue/Ten Commandments). See Matthew 22:34-40.

Discussion Questions for 2 John 1-6

1. What doctrine is implied from the following: the fact that the Greek verb translated “have known” in verse 1 is in the perfect tense (note: a perfect tense verb describes a past, point in time event with ongoing result; so, have known and continue to know); the fact that the truth dwells (present tense verb, as reflected by the –eth ending in the KJV; so, is dwelling, or abiding, or remaining) in the believer (verse 2); and the fact that the truth that dwells in the believer does so forever (verse 2)?

Answer: perseverance in the faith, i.e., a true believer will continue to believe as a Christian, or will not fully and finally turn away from the faith

2. What lesson might be learned from the fact that John first commends his readers (in verse 4) before commanding them (in verses 5 and 6)?

Possible answer: when it becomes necessary to command someone to do something, commending them first for the right they are already doing may encourage them to do what is commanded, as well as make them more receptive to the command

Verse 7

For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist.

After exhorting his readers to practice the truth, particularly by loving others (verses 4-6), John now exhorts them to protect the truth (verses 7-11). Curiously, John begins verse 7 with a “for,” indicating that what he is about to say in this verse is the reason why his readers need to love each other (verses 5 & 6). Their bond in love would, as it were, form a wall that the false teachers would not be able to penetrate. If the false teachers were able to penetrate this wall, they would then be able to attack the citadel, their bond in truth (cf. verses 1 & 2, where the bond of truth is the reality underlying the bond of love). Thus, loving one another was their first line of defense against the attack of the false teachers and their strategy of divide and conquer. John calls these false teachers “deceivers” (cf. 1 John 2:26 and 3:7) who “have gone out²⁷ into the world” (cf. 1 John 4:1), perhaps also having gone out from the church in the process (1 John 2:19). They taught a corrupt Christology, denying the doctrine of the Incarnation (cf. footnote 10) in particular (“those who do not acknowledge²⁸ Jesus Christ as coming²⁹ in the flesh”; cf. 1 John 4:2-3a). These false teachers were the embodiment of the deceptive and antichrist-like spirit (cf. 1 John 4:3) that characterizes the last days (cf. 1 John 2:18); thus, John calls them “the deceiver”³⁰ and “the antichrist” (cf. 1 John 2:22). John does not mince his words, and for good reason. As Marshall (p. 72) states: “When, however, the central citadel of the faith [the Incarnation] is under attack, there is need for clear speaking.”

²⁷Stott (p. 211) points out that just as Jesus was sent out by the Father into the world (John 17:18a; cf. John 20:21b), and just as the disciples were sent out by Jesus into the world (John 17:18b; cf. John 20:21b), so these false prophets had been sent out (by Satan) into the world. Satan seeks to counter virtually every good thing God does with an evil counterfeit.

²⁸Some have pointed out that John does not explicitly state that the false teachers explicitly denied the Incarnation (he strongly implies that they did, however), leading Hiebert (p. 302) to remark: “What a professed Christian teacher deliberately refuses to acknowledge in dealing with doctrinal matters may be just as revealing as what he openly rejects.”

²⁹Interestingly, John uses the present tense participle (“coming”), perhaps signifying the ongoing nature of the Incarnation, i.e., once Christ became incarnate, He remained incarnate forevermore.

³⁰“The deceiver *par excellence*,” as Marshall (p. 71) puts it (so also A. E. Brooke, cited in Burdick, p. 106).

Verse 8

Watch yourselves, that you do not lose what we have accomplished, but that you may receive a full reward.

As mentioned under “occasion” in the introduction to 2 John, those who visited John from the local church to whom he is writing may have informed him that the false teachers on the prowl in Asia were in their area already. If not, John was certain that they soon would be. Thus, he exhorts his readers to be on the lookout for them (“watch yourselves”; cf. Matthew 16:6//Mark 8:15; Matthew 24:4//Mark 13:5-6//Luke 21:8; Mark 13:22-23; Philippians 3:2, and Colossians 2:8, where the same Greek verb is used in similar contexts). The reason why John wants his readers to be on the lookout for these false teachers is so that these false teachers will not make inroads into their lives, thus causing loss of reward both for John (“we”)³¹ and for them (“you”). Most interpreters believe that John is speaking of the possibility of his readers losing some of the reward they might otherwise receive at the Judgment Seat of Christ, thus diminishing their capacity to enjoy their eternal stay in heaven (Colossians 2:18 and Revelation 3:11). Or, John may be warning his readers of the danger of apostasy, a danger to which the true believer will not succumb, due in part to heeding such warnings.

Verse 9

Anyone who goes too far and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God; the one who abides in the teaching, he has both the Father and the Son.

John makes it clear that those who are corrupt in their Christology are not within the confines of Christianity (“does not have God”). A true believer will persevere in the faith, abiding (“abides” in this verse is a present tense verb) in the doctrine (“teaching”) of Christ (cf. John 8:31). Interpreters are divided as to whether “of Christ” in “teaching of Christ” is a “subjective genitive,” i.e., what Christ Himself taught (so Stott, Ryrie, and Kistemaker) or an “objective genitive,” i.e., the teaching about Christ (so Marshall, Akin, and Burdick, as well as *The Zondervan NASB Study Bible*). The context tips the scales in favor of the second (see verse 7). The false teachers were “progressive” in their thinking, so progressive in fact that they went “too far” (NIV: “runs ahead”), “fell off the cliff”/“went out of bounds” theologically, thus showing their true colors. Yarbrough (p. 349) calls them “innovates.” Akin (p. 231) says that “when someone adds to the biblical testimony of Jesus Christ, a subtraction from the truth of who he is and what he did is inevitable” and (p. 232) “there has been no true progression but a fatal and flawed digression.” Stott (p. 213) remarks that they had gone so far ahead that they had even left God behind. John describes the believer as one who “has

³¹Besides here, other Scriptures that teach that spiritual waywardness causes not only the spiritually-wayward individual to lose out, but also those responsible for his spiritual care include Galatians 4:11, Philippians 2:16, 1 Thessalonians 3:5, and Hebrews 13:17.

both the Father and the Son.” To “have” God (cf. 1 John 2:23) is to have a spiritual relationship with Him (Marshall, p. 73). You cannot have the Father without also having the Son, and vice versa (cf. John 14:6, 1 Timothy 2:5, and 1 John 2:23).

Verse 10

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house, and do not give him a greeting;

John now instructs the congregation to whom he is writing what to do should one of the false teachers with a corrupt Christology (“does not bring this teaching [of correct Christology]”) come their way. First, John tells them not to “receive him into your house.”³² “House” here is likely a reference to the local church to whom John is writing, as churches met in homes during the first centuries of the church (see, for example, Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, and Philemon 2; cf. Acts 16:40 and Romans 16:23). Thus, John is saying, in effect, do not let a heretic teach or preach in your church. If “house” refers to a personal residence, then John is saying do not provide accommodations for a heretical itinerant preacher (providing accommodations for itinerant preachers was a common practice in the early church; see, for example, 3 John 5-8). In either case, this verse does not seem to be speaking to the issue of how to deal with a Jehovah’s Witness who shows up at your doorstep (as it is often applied).³³ Not only does John instruct his readers not to allow a false teacher to teach or preach in their church, but also not to “give him a greeting,” an affectionate expression of farewell (Hiebert, p. 309; cf. 2 Corinthians 13:11 in the KJV and in the NIV); not to wish him joy on his journey (Burdick, p. 109); not to offer an expression of affirmation and support (Akin, p. 233); not to give a greeting of sympathy (Ryrie, p. 1034); not to express acceptance and affection (Yarbrough, p. 352). John’s words in this verse, though scandalous to modern sensibilities³⁴, “contain a vitally needed corrective to our modern easy-going tolerance which will tolerate and

³²“The statement is all the more remarkable since it comes from the ‘apostle of love’” (Barker, p. 365).

³³“It does not mean that (say) one of Jehovah’s Witnesses should not be invited into the house for a cup of tea in order to be shown the way of God more perfectly in the sitting-room than would be convenient on the doorstep” (F. F. Bruce, quoted in Stott, p. 216). One may consult Akin (pp. 271-272) for more on this.

³⁴“To some modern minds these instructions seem unduly rigid and harsh. A great part of the problem, however, lies in the modern inclination to be highly tolerant of religious differences. One must frankly face the fact that the New Testament writers did not share this spirit of toleration. Their commitment to the truth and their consciousness of the dangers of religious error called forth many stern denunciations of false teachers. Not surprisingly, this modern age, having a diminishing sense of the dangers of heresy, has lost its convictions about the truth” (Hodges, p. 908).

even fellowship with open error for the sake of peace and organizational unity” (Hiebert, p. 286).

Verse 11

for the one who gives him a greeting participates in his evil deeds.

John now gives the reason for his final instruction in verse 10. Giving a heretic a positive verbal sendoff is treasonous because, in so doing, one is in a sense aiding and abetting/being an accomplice to the heretic’s corrupt cause (cf. 1 Timothy 5:22).³⁵ The Greek verb translated “participates” is *koinoneo*, a derivative of the Greek noun *koinonia*, meaning “fellowship,” something a believer is not to have (nor in reality can have) with an unbeliever (2 Corinthians 6:14; cf. 1 Corinthians 10:20 and Ephesians 5:11). Heresy is evil, a fact that John underscores by placing the Greek adjective translated “evil” last in the Greek sentence, for emphasis (the Greek sentence literally reads: “. . . is sharing in the deeds of him the evil ones”).

CONCLUSION (verses 12-13)

John concludes his epistle by expressing his desire to personally visit his readers (verse 12) and by sending greetings from the membership of a sister church (verse 13).

Verse 12

Though I have many things to write to you, I do not want to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, so that your joy may be made full.

John quickly brings the letter to a close (perhaps, as several interpreters have suggested, because he was running out of room on the piece of parchment upon which he was writing and did not want to use a second piece, since such parchment was pricey, it being estimated that the standard piece of parchment could only hold about the number of words contained in this epistle), saving the rest of what he wanted to say for a future visit (cf. 3 John 13-14), a visit that John was confident would make both his³⁶ and their joy complete (cf. Philippians 2:2 and 1 John 1:4). Burdick (p. 110) says in regards to this verse: “...[S]uch personal fellowship is one of God’s means of increasing and preserving genuine Christianity. Although joy is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22), it is not fostered in isolation, but in the give and take of interpersonal relationships with other believers.”

³⁵“Even a word of greeting might tend to give them a sense of acceptance that could be misconstrued. The readers were to make plain from their aloofness that they in no way condoned the activities of these men” (Hodges, p. 908).

³⁶Many (Marshall, Akin, KJV, and NIV) are of the opinion that the Greek text actually reads “our joy,” not “your joy.” Notice that the NASB recognizes the possibility by a marginal note.

Verse 13

The children of your chosen sister greet you.

John concludes his second epistle by sending greetings to the church he is writing to from the church he is writing from (Ephesus?), “children” being the members of a sister church (“your chosen sister”; cf. verse 1 and comments on).

Discussion Questions for 2 John 7-13

1. According to verse 7, should the fact that the Mormons of our day have “missionaries” be surprising?

Answer: no

Why or why not?

Possible answers: because such misleading missionaries were around as far back as John’s day, so their presence is nothing new; Satan tries to counter what God does (John 17:18) with counterfeits (see 2 Corinthians 11:13-15)

2. What is the implication of the verb, “watch” in verse 8 being a present tense verb?

Suggested answer: we need to be continually on guard against false teaching/never let our guard down—see 1 Peter 5:8

3. Why is John’s requirement in verse 10, which some may perceive as unloving, actually loving?

Suggested answers: because it is unloving [towards God and others] to aid and abet what is erroneous/false; because if one loves truth, he must not love what is its antithesis/opposite

4. Verse 10 is one of several texts in Scripture that is the basis for the practice of ecclesiastical separation, the need for ecclesiastical organizations (churches, etc.) to reject, rather than receive, what is contrary to Christianity. What are some other such texts in Scripture?

Possible answers: Romans 16:17, 2 Corinthians 6:14-17, Ephesians 5:11, and Revelation 18:4