

Grace to You :: esp Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time

Second John

Scripture: 2 John

Code: MSB63

Title

The epistle's title is "2 John." It is the second in a series of 3 epistles that bear the Apostle John's name. Second and Third John present the closest approximation in the NT to the conventional letter form of the contemporary Greco-Roman world, since they were addressed from an individual to individuals. Second and Third John are the shortest epistles in the NT, each containing less than 300 Greek words. Each letter could fit on a single papyrus sheet (cf. 3 John 13).

Author and Date

The author is the Apostle John. He describes himself in 2 John 1 as "The Elder" which conveys the advanced age of the apostle, his authority, and status during the foundational period of Christianity when he was involved with Jesus' ministry. The precise date of the epistle cannot be determined. Since the wording, subject matter, and circumstances of 2 John closely approximate 1 John (v. 5 [cf. 1 John 2:7; 3:11]; v. 6 [cf. 1 John 5:3]; v. 7 [cf. 1 John 2:18–26]; v. 9 [cf. 1 John 2:23]; v. 12; [cf. 1 John 1:4]), most likely John composed the letter at the same time or soon after 1 John, ca. A. D. 90–95, during his ministry at Ephesus in the latter part of his life.

Background and Setting

Second John deals with the same problem as 1 John (see Introduction to 1 John: Background and Setting). False teachers influenced by the beginnings of Gnostic thought were threatening the church (v. 7; cf. 1 John 2:18,19,22,23; 4:1–3). The strategic difference is that while 1 John has no specific individual or church specified to whom it was addressed, 2 John has a particular local group or house-church in mind (v. 1).

The focus of 2 John is that the false teachers were conducting an itinerant ministry among John's congregations, seeking to make converts, and taking advantage of Christian hospitality to advance their cause (vv. 10,11; cf. Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2; 1 Pet. 4:9). The individual addressed in the greeting (v. 1) inadvertently or unwisely may have shown these false prophets hospitality, or John may have feared that the false teachers would attempt to take advantage of her kindness (vv. 10,11). The apostle seriously warns his readers against showing hospitality to such deceivers (vv. 10,11). Although his exhortation may appear on the surface to be harsh or unloving, the acutely dangerous nature of their teaching justified such actions, especially since it threatened to destroy the very foundations of the faith (v. 9).

Historical and Theological Themes

The overall theme of 2 John closely parallels 1 John's theme of a "recall to the fundamentals of the faith" or "back to the basics of Christianity" (vv. 4–6). For John, the basics of Christianity are summarized by adherence to the truth (v. 4), love (v. 5), and obedience (v.6).

The apostle, however, conveys an additional but related theme in 2 John: "the biblical guidelines for hospitality." Not only are Christians to adhere to the fundamentals of the faith, but the gracious hospitality that is commanded of them (Rom. 12:13) must be discriminating. The basis of hospitality must be common love of or interest in the truth, and Christians must share their love within the confines of that truth. They are not called to universal acceptance of anyone who claims to be a believer. Love must be discerning. Hospitality and kindness must be focused on those who are adhering to the fundamentals of the faith. Otherwise, Christians may actually aid those who are attempting to destroy those basic truths of the faith. Sound doctrine must serve as the test of fellowship and the basis of separation between those who profess to be Christians and those who actually are (vv. 10,11; cf. Rom. 16:17; Gal.1:8,9; 2 Thess. 3:6,14; Titus 3:10).

Interpretive Challenges

Second John stands in direct antithesis to the frequent cry for ecumenism and Christian unity among believers. Love and truth are inseparable in Christianity. Truth must always guide the exercise of love (cf. Eph. 4:15). Love must stand the test of truth. The main lesson of this book is that truth determines the bounds of love, and as a consequence, of unity. Therefore, truth must exist before love can unite, for truth generates love (1 Pet. 1:22). When someone compromises the truth, true Christian love and unity are destroyed. Only a shallow sentimentalism exists where the truth is not the foundation of unity.

The reference to the "elect lady and her children" (v. 1) should be understood in a normal, plain sense referring to a particular woman and her children rather than interpreted in a non-literal sense as a church and its membership. Similarly, the reference to "the children of your elect sister" (v. 13) should be understood as a reference to the nieces and/or nephews of the individual addressed in verse 1, rather than metaphorically to a sister church and its membership. In these verses, John conveys greetings to personal acquaintances that he has come to know through his ministry.

Outline

- I. The Basis of Christian Hospitality (1–3)
- II. The Behavior of Christian Hospitality (4–6)
- III. The Bounds of Christian Hospitality (7–11)
- IV. The Blessings of Christian Hospitality (12,13)

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