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The Second Epistle of John: *An Introduction, Part 2*

In his work ministering to preachers of the word, Richard Baxter wrote this:

“As long as men have eyes as well as ears, they will think they *see* your meaning as well as *hear* it; and they are apter to believe their sight than their hearing, as being the more perfect sense of the two. All that a minister does, is a kind of preaching; and if you live a covetous or careless life, you preach these sins to your people by your practice.”¹

This is an important exhortation which not only applies to any and all in any leadership capacity, whether it is preaching, teaching, pastoring, or parenting but also is rooted and grounded in Scripture.² Paul exhorted the believers at Corinth this way:

1 Corinthians 11:1, “Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.”

The Hebrew writer commanded this:

¹ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, pp. 84-85.

² Compare also 1 Corinthians 4:16; Phil. 3:17; Hebrews 6:12.

Hebrews 13:8, “Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.”

Truly when it comes to learning the things of the Lord, we are called not only to heed the spoken word, but also the word as it is lived out. And that is why perhaps so many people flocked to the city of Ephesus toward the end of the first century A.D. It was here that a spiritual giant walked the land. He not only was a witness of Christ, but he also was the last Biblical prophet this world has ever seen.

Of course we are speaking about the Apostle John. Church history records that from 66 A.D. on, John made his abode in Ephesus where he labored amongst the people of God unto their growth in grace. During this time, many flocked to sit at his feet. F. F. Bruce wrote this:

“John lived to a great age, until the time came when he was the sole survivor of those who had been in close contact with Jesus before His death and resurrection. It needs little imagination to understand how eagerly he would be sought out and listened to by people who valued first-hand information about the deeds and words of his Master and theirs.”³

Now whether you realize it or not, it is our privilege this morning to sit at John’s feet and learn about the Kingdom of God not only from what he says in this epistle but, as we’ll see, from what he does. Accordingly, let’s continue in our introduction to this wonderful letter. Let me begin by briefly reviewing what we saw last time.

The Players

The first player is the elder. This is in reference to the Apostle John. It is interesting to note that John was free to relate to the body of Christ any way he desired, yet that which he considered himself when it came to the church was: “the pastor,” “the shepherd,” “the care-taker of the souls of men.”

I would suggest to you that this just isn’t John, but what we all must be in Christ. There are a variety of ways to relate to the body of Christ, yet that which is most precious, important, and impacting is that of the caretaker of another’s soul. James describes this speaking of all in Christ:

James 1:27, “This is pure and undefiled religion in the sight of *our* God and Father, to visit [the word behind ‘visit’ implies the loving oversight of another’s soul] orphans and widows in their distress, *and* to keep oneself unstained by the world.”

This is the calling that rests upon each and every one of us.

- As husbands, Ephesians 5:23.
- Parents, Ephesians 6:4.
- Members of the body of Christ, James 1:27.
- Spiritually mature, Galatians 6:2.
- Those on the receiving end of teaching, Romans 1:11-12.

³ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 15.

Taking responsibility for each other's well-being in Christ is NOT an option NOR is it the prerogative of a few, BUT the minimum expectation on the part of Christ for all of us. Thus as we see how John deigned to relate to the early church, we conclude that this is what each and everyone in Christ ought to aim for when it comes to the "hat" they wear in relation to this body.

The second players are "to the chosen lady and her children." This is not in reference to a literal woman along with her household, BUT, as we saw last time, to a local body of Christ and its members.⁴ Recall, the very reason John moved to Asia Minor in 66 A.D. was to strengthen the local churches which were falling into decline. It was to one of these churches that John penned this epistle. Why?

John's Overriding Passion

John's overriding passion was his "love in truth." Everything John wrote in this epistle, 1 John and 3 John flowed from a love for Christ's church. The body of Christ, the people of God, the church, is a primary part of the outworking of God's plan on this earth. In other words, the church is not an after-thought, BUT the focus of God's redemptive work in this world. Thus it is only natural for a child of God, not to mention a shepherd, to be moved in this life out of love for Christ's church.

And that is exactly what John wrote here. It is a hard statement, but we all must receive it, if you profess a love for Christ then you will by necessity love the church. If you do not love the church, then according to John, you are a sham Christian no matter what you profess with your mouth. Look at the text.

2 John 1, "whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth."

Recall that John said this because at the time of the writing of this epistle, false Christians were going from church to church, city to city, proclaiming that they were servants of Christ. And the genuine body of Christ, according to their covenant tradition, was supporting them!

Accordingly, the message of John is simple: *Family of God, don't support a false servant of Christ!* And how do you know the difference between a false worker and a genuine servant? Answer: Do they love Christ's church?!

Now you must see that we are not firstly talking about the people of the church (though that is involved), but the church of God as it exists in the world today. A genuine servant of God is one who is concerned for the body of Christ as a corporate and yet organic entity. As such, they are burdened by the abuses being perpetrated today. They are not content simply to be part of a "good local body," but their heart longs for many such local bodies. And so when a prominent personality falls, they don't mock, they grieve!

This is the corporate passion of each and every child of God. It's the passion of Christ, and it's the passion which led to the writing of this epistle; a love for the body of Christ! Find someone who has this love/passion, and you most likely have found a fellow servant of Christ. Find someone who does not have this passion, and regardless of what they profess, we must view them as sham Christians who do

⁴ Compare also Revelation 12

not love the Lord.

Now this is a difficult message, not only to receive, but also to give. And so we are brought to the priority of John when he wrote this epistle. How do you say such a hard thing to a body of Christ and not fear being ostracized? What are the guiding principles as we endeavor to fulfill the ministry of the Kingdom?

John's Priority

2 John 2, "for the sake of the truth which abides in us and will be with us forever."⁵

Truly John lived long enough to watch many winds of false doctrine blow through the church. In fact, if you were to label eras of church history, you would label the era in which John was writing as a time in which the church "Contended for the Truth!"

- Asia Minor, and more specifically the eastern part of Asia Minor, fell prey to a syncretism in life and thought in which ancestral beliefs were fused with the teaching of the mystery religions of John's day.
- Paul warned of this in Acts when he wrote, "and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on alert" (Acts 20:30-31).
- In fact toward the end of Paul's life (~64 A.D.), apostasy was rife amongst the churches in Asia such that Christianity fell on hard times. "You are aware of the fact that all who are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Timothy 1:15).

Now the missionary efforts of 66 A.D. did much to reverse the trend, yet at the writing of 2 John the heresy known as Docetism had taken root in the church. John as well as all the apostles knew the Savior to be a real human being; they confessed Him to be the "Son of God."⁶ When this confession began being contemplated by Greek Christians, who when they were pagans held to a Platonic dualism which asserted that spirit is good, but any thing of the physical world is evil; debate arose as to the true nature of Christ. The question was: How could the true God indwell a physical and so sinful body of flesh and blood?

The Docetic answer was that since such a dwelling was impossible, Christ's body of flesh and blood was not real but only an appearance; Christ only *seemed* to be human. (The Greek word for "to seem" is *δοκεω* (*dokeo*) which is where we get the term Docetism.) In fact, one unique variety of Docetism at this time was put forth by a man by the name of Cerinthus who lived during the era of John and against whom John himself battled⁷ He was trained in Egypt, but lived in Asia Minor.

Accepting the dualism of his era, Cerinthus taught that the man Jesus was different from the divine Christ who descended upon the Lord at His baptism, but then left Him shortly before He died so that "...Jesus suffered and rose again, while the Christ remained immune from suffering, since He was a

⁵ It is interesting to note here that what John says about truth in this verse is what Christ said about the Spirit of God in John 14:17. As the author of God's word is the Spirit, to be indwelt by the Spirit is to have the truth abide in us and be with us.

⁶ Compare Matthew 16:16

⁷ Polycarp told the story that John once fled a bathhouse when he found out Cerinthus was inside, yelling "Let us flee, lest the building fall down; for Cerinthus, the enemy of the truth, is inside!" (Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* iii. 3, 4).

spiritual being.”⁸

The net effect of this heresy was to deny the humanity of Christ (not the humanity of Jesus)- it was divine, but not human. This is a big deal. If Christ wasn't a man, then He couldn't have upheld the covenant of works by which we are condemned. It was with man that the covenant was made. Thus it could only be by a man that it could be upheld!

Do you see? If Christ wasn't fully man, then no one is saved!

Accordingly you will note the strong assertion of the truth of Christ's humanity in this and the other epistles of John.

2 John 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.”

1 John 2:22, “Who is the liar but the one who denies that Jesus is the Christ? This is the antichrist, the one who denies the Father and the Son.”

1 John 4:2, “By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God.”

That was the specific truth that John was defending when he penned this epistle. Yet the commitment and allegiance portrayed by John here is that which ought to capture each and every one of us this day. The focus of these epistles was on the upholding, maintaining, loving, submitting, and so protecting of the truth-, that is what is behind two of John's favorites words in these epistles: truth and abide. Nineteen times John refers to the theme of “truth” in these epistles and 19 times he calls us to abide in it! Clearly the longing of John was for the child of God- and so every local church body- to abide in the truth and so defend it, protect it, preserve it, and embody it.

Accordingly, if we would do battle for the Lord Jesus Christ, we must rise and make a stand wherever truth is compromised; whether it be in doctrine or in ethics. This is why Jude wrote this:

Jude 3, “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

Paul warned:

Acts 20:29-31a, “I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be on the alert...”

1 Timothy 6:12a, “Fight the good fight of faith...”

Such is the charge upon each and every one of us.

⁸ Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* i. 26.

What does this mean? Far from a generic calling to stand for the truth blindly, I want you to notice that in the epistles of John

- Truth and love are NOT in opposition to one another.
- Never is the child of God to choose between the two.
- Rather the two must balance each other such that the Christian always speaks the truth in love; the message of Paul (Ephesians 4:15), and yet loves the brethren in truth; the message of John.

2 John 1, “The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth...”

2 John 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.”

2 John 6a, “And this is love, that we walk according to His commandments...”

3 John 1, “The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.”

1 John 2:5a, “But whoever keeps His word, in him the love of God has truly been perfected...”

1 John 3:18, “Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

1 John 5:3a, “For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments...”

Dr. John MacArthur put it this way:

“Christian love, fellowship, and hospitality are vitally important, since they manifest the transforming power of the gospel (Compare Romans 12;13; 1 Timothy 3;2; Titus 1:8; 1 Peter 4:9). Believers share a spiritual love that flows from their common eternal life in Christ. But they cannot genuinely manifest that love apart from an unswerving commitment to the truth of God’s Word. That truth permeates all aspects of the church’s individual and corporate life, underlying all its preaching, evangelism, and fellowship.”⁹

What this means is that it is not enough for the child of God to adhere to the truth of God’s word, nor lay his life down in love for the brethren. The believer must labor and strive to do both!

A Message of Assurance

Such is the Priority which must govern us in life! And that brings us to The Message of this epistle. Notice it is threefold.

2 John 3, “**Grace be with you, mercy, and peace,** from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love.”

This is such a contrast to Paul’s writing and yet quite predictable on account of the time when this

⁹ 1-3 John, MNTC, p. 218.

epistle was written. Paul was writing at a time when the foundation of the church of God still was drying.¹⁰ As such his message took the form of a longing for God to bless the church.

Romans 1:7, "To all who are beloved of God in Rome, called *as* saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."

This is a prayer and so a wish, "May God's grace rest upon you such that you might know the resulting peace of God!"

2 Timothy 1:2, "To Timothy, my beloved son: Grace, mercy *and* peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord."

You know that this was Paul's final epistle; soon he would be executed. What was his prayer? It was for Timothy to know the grace, mercy, and peace of God! Well now, twenty-five years later, what was John's message? It wasn't for the body of Christ *to know* the grace, mercy, and peace of God, at the writing of 2 John God's people were not facing persecution; they were contending! Rather, it was to assure them that *they had it!* John Stott wrote this:...

"...the salutation is neither a prayer, nor a wish, but a confident affirmation... John... places first in the sentence an emphatic *estai*, which should be translated not as a prayer... but as a declaration."¹¹

Family of God, we have to get passed the thinking that if you and I do and think such and such that God alternately either will bless or curse us! The riches of God's grace, mercy, and peace abide with us today in Christ! That is not something we work for, but something we have and are called to live in light of each day!

Ephesians 1:3, "Blessed *be* the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly *places* in Christ."

2 Peter 1:3, "Seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence."

John could thus confidently write:

2 John 3, "Grace, mercy *and* peace will be with us, from God the Father and from Jesus Christ..."

I hope you see it! We don't need any more from God than what we already have in Christ. What we need is the faith to see this and the boldness to step out in faith and so serve in light of it!

And what do we have in Christ today?

- Grace- denotes the undeserved love of God as evidenced by the cross of Christ. This ever and always is ours! We live in grace.

¹⁰ Compare Ephesians 2:20

¹¹ *The Letters of John*, TNTC, p. 206.

- Mercy- is similar to grace, but it includes the idea of God’s faithfulness to His covenant relationship with man, and so embraces the notion of divine forgiveness.¹²

2 Timothy 2:13, “If we are faithless, He remains faithful; for He cannot deny Himself.”

- Peace- is a Jewish concept, signifying well-being at every level when it comes to man’s relationship with God. In this context, it clearly references...

Philippians 4:7, “...the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, [which] guards your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

A Message of Discernment

These three glorious benefits belong to each and every one in Christ. Truly, 2 John is a message of assurance and so encouragement! Yet it also is a message of discernment.

2 John 3, “Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, **from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father**, in truth and love.”

John is harping on the truth of the deity AND the humanity of Christ. That was where the battle was raging in his day, and so that is the battle in which he engaged.

“From God the Father and from Jesus Christ” links the source of his message BOTH to God the Father AND Jesus Christ, John was making a statement as to the deity of Christ!¹³

“And from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father” this latter phrase lays stress on the humanity of Christ. He is the living, breathing child of God. Though the dualists had a difficult time with this, they were wrong. Jesus Christ, notice John uses both names, was and is the infinite God/man!¹⁴

We talk today about the mandate to engage the culture in which we live. Let us learn a lesson from this epistle:

- Though John personally loved many facets of Christianity and many doctrines, the battle at the time of the writing of this letter was raging around the personhood of Christ.
- And so though no doubt John would have preferred to have written many other things, fidelity to the truth meant addressing the issue at hand.

2 John 12a, “Having many things to write to you, I do not want to *do so* with paper and ink...”

In this matter, John was much like:

¹² Stephen Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, WBC, p. 321.

¹³ John MacArthur wrote, “The twofold repetition of *para* (**from**) stresses Jesus’ equality with the Father.” (*1-3 John*, MNTC, p. 219).

¹⁴ John MacArthur wrote, “John emphasized Christ’s identity as God’s Son because the false teachers were denying that truth.” (*1-3 John*, MNTC, pp. 219-220)

- Jude

Jude 3, “Beloved, while I was making every effort to write you about our common salvation, I felt the necessity to write to you appealing that you contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints.”

- The Hebrew writer

Hebrews 5:11, “Concerning him we have much to say, and *it is* hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.”

Truly there were many things that John wanted to say to this church at this time, but he couldn’t. He had to rise to the issue at hand. And so it ought to be in our day as well. I have observed that the church is filled with agenda-driven Christians. They do not listen to their family, friends, co-workers, etc. they are too busy talking... pushing... and/or imposing their passion on others. So rather than addressing people where they are at, they minister past people.

Brothers and sisters, don’t miss it. The nature of Kingdom Ministry requires *discernment* when it comes to bringing Christ both to one another and to a lost and dying world. If we are to be effective, we must therefore stop talking and imposing, and start listening, asking questions, and so discerning what the issue is at hand.

Francis Schaeffer once said that if he was on an one hour flight and had the opportunity to share the gospel with the person sitting next to him, he would ask questions for fifty-five minutes and then talk for five.¹⁵ Martin Luther wrote this:

“If I profess with the loudest voice and the clearest exposition every portion of the truth of God, except precisely that little point which the world and the devil are at that moment attacking, I am not confessing Christ, however boldly I may be professing Christ. Where the battle rages, there the loyalty of the soldier is proved, and to be steady on all the battle-fields besides is mere flight and disgrace if he flinches at that point.”¹⁶

A Message of Balance

Indeed! The Message of 2 John is a message of discernment, calling us to listen, observe, ask questions, and then engage our world and one another “...unto the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love” (Ephesians 4:16b). And yet lastly notice it is a message of balance.

2 John 3, “Grace be with you, mercy, and peace, from God the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, **in truth and love.**”

As I just referenced in our examination of verse 2, truth and love both are referenced nineteen times in these three epistles. Now you tell me what is more important:

¹⁵ Taken from seminary class notes on *Outreach to Contemporary Culture* taught by Jerram Barrs.

¹⁶ Quoted in Chuck and Donna McIlhenny, *When The Wicked Seize A City*, p. 85.

- A right legged soldier or a left legged soldier?
- Eating or breathing?
- Jesus Christ or God the Father?
- Truth or love?

Our answer to all of the above is: both! You ought not to choose nor should you! Walking with Christ and so living out the Christian life involves balance between these two important priorities. We must be people who hold to the truth of God's word unto death. But we must also be people who understand that a major part of our doctrine is love. To deny the one and hold to the other; or to exalt the one above the other is to dishonor Christ and so compromise His ministry.

Accordingly, throughout these epistles; and in fact, in the very next section, John walks beautifully the fine line between holding to truth and loving the brethren. John Stott observed this truth:

“So the Christian fellowship should be marked equally by love and truth, and we are to avoid extremism which pursues either at the expense of the other. Our love grows soft if it is not strengthened by truth, and our truth hard if it is not softened by love. Scripture commands us both to love each other in the truth and to hold the truth in love.”¹⁷

Such is our calling as well. For church history often records two extremes.

- People who are so caught up in caring for people that they do it blindly without discrimination, and so in the end compromise the truth.¹⁸
- But then there is the other extreme; people thinking that they love the truth of God's word so much that they compromise their obligation to Christ's body, the church.¹⁹

If in the name of truth you forsake the body of Christ and so the fellowship of God's people, you have a perverted doctrine. Your speech is not seasoned with grace, you have a perverted doctrine. ****And yet**** if in the name of love you ignore or compromise truth, you too have a perverted doctrine. The love of truth must compel us to submit to truth, have it transform our thinking and our lives, and so walk in the footsteps of Christ by which our Lord ministered to a hostile world and to an apostate church.

That represents the calling and the balance so evident in the Epistles of John. Yet how is this balance attained?

- John's wording here links the calling to walk in “truth and love” with the “grace, mercy, and peace” which is ours in Christ.
- In other words, if we are going to walk in truth and love we must live in light of the grace of God which withholds the punishment due us on account of our sin and so leaves us assured of His

¹⁷ *The Letters of John*, TNTC, p. 207.

¹⁸ Hey homeless person, you want to come to my home, eat and not work, that's O.K.? Hey false teacher, you need a place to stay? We'll gladly put you up in the name of Christ. You want to gather in a room on Sunday and not receive the truth, but discuss what is true for you? Let's do it and call the movement, “The emerging church.”

¹⁹ We all know men and women who supposedly love the truth so much that they can't find a church in which to fellowship. So they forsake Christ's bride and stay at home! Then there's the contentious Christian. They love Christ so much that trampling underfoot a soul is acceptable collateral in their personal warfare against error. Then there is the one who witnesses not out of love for Christ or the non-believer, but out of a need to placate their guilty conscience.

mercy and so upheld by the peace of God which surpasses all comprehension.

This is an important observation, which is not original to me, but noted in almost every one of my commentaries on 2 John. Invariably the person who is unbalanced in their walk is one who is off-focused in their Christian life- either

- They have made truth- doctrine- their bag, or
- They have made love their focus.

Family of God, what ought to be our preoccupation? It ought neither to be truth or love in concept, but

- The perfections of Christ.
- The grace, mercy, and peace of God.
- The beauty of His cross... the abundance of His forgiveness... and so the fellowship enjoyed as a result.

This naturally will lead to a pursuit of truth and love, not as concepts, but as the personification of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ! May God give us the grace to be so committed unto the glory of God and the building up of the body of Christ.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

All our sermons can be accessed via the World Wide Web. The recording for this sermon (the last few minutes were not recorded because of a power outage during the sermon) and these notes can be found at [Intro to 2 John Part 2](#). The web address for all sermons at Bethel Presbyterian Church can be found out as follows: <http://bethelpresbyterian.sermonaudio.com>

About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on March 1, 2009. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church.