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THE SECOND AND THIRD EPISTLES OF JOHN

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Introduction

We treat these small documents together. No intelligent person can doubt that both Epistles were written by the same person. We do not need to investigate the objections and inventions of rationalists like Bretschneider, those of the so-called Tuebingen school and the modern critics, who deny the Johannine authorship and teach that the fictitious "John the Presbyter of Ephesus" wrote these two letters.

But all these modern conceptions are answered by the ancient authorities which ascribe both Epistles to the writer of the First Epistle, that is, the Apostle John. Irenaeus, who as a boy had listened to Polycarp, who knew John personally, bears witness to the genuineness of the Second Epistle, so does Clement of Alexandria, the Muratorian fragment, Dionysius of Alexandria, and others. Both Epistles seem to have been accepted from the very beginning as the inspired testimony of John.

The internal evidence is conclusive. Both Epistles are in tone, style and vocabulary like the Gospel of John and the First Epistle of John. The great characteristic words of the other writings of John (the Gospel and John 1) "Love," "truth," "world," etc., are found in these two Epistles. They are, indeed, complementary to the First Epistle and give some of the truths contained in the First Epistle in a practical way. The warning contained in the Second Epistle concerning receiving one who does not bring the doctrine of Christ, that is, an antichrist, connects closely with the

instructions of 1 John 4. There is no question but both Epistles are appendices to the First Epistle.

THE SECOND EPISTLE

The Second Epistle is addressed by the elder unto the elect lady and her children. The word elder has the same meaning as it has in 1 Peter 5. Some take it that the elect lady means an assembly, and her children the members of the assembly. But this is a very strained application.

The word "Kyria" (lady) excludes this meaning, besides other reasons which we do not follow here. She was a Christian woman of note generally known and beloved, having children, whom the apostle had found walking in the truth. She had also a sister with children, who seems to have been in the same place where the apostle was, probably in Ephesus. This is indicated by the last verse of the Epistle, "The children of thy elect sister greet thee." The keynote of this message to the elect lady, unknown by name, is the word "truth." The apostle lets them know that he loves them, as well as all other believers in the truth. That is the ground of real love; every child of God--man, woman or child--is best beloved for the sake of the truth, the blessed truth so abundantly poured forth in the First Epistle, the truth which is Christ Himself And that truth "dwelleth in us, and shall be with us forever." Thus the truth Known binds together in closest fellowship all who know Him.

Then follows a blessed greeting, "Grace, mercy and peace shall be with you, from the Father, and from the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love." The statement, "the Son of the Father" is unique; it is not found elsewhere in the New Testament and is in full keeping with the object of this little Epistle, for the denial of Christ coming in the flesh, and the warning against these deceivers, is the chief message of the Epistle. The great joy of the Apostle was that he found them walking in the truth, that the children of the elect lady walked according to the commandment received from the Father (1 John 3:24). Having the truth necessitates walking in the truth. One who claims to have the truth and does not walk in it, shows that he does not know the truth in his heart. But walking in the truth is the result of having and knowing the truth.

What we have stated before, that these two Epistles are appendices of the First Epistle, is seen by the fifth verse (1 John 3:23-24). It is the old and new commandment. It was old because it was manifested in Christ Himself; new because it is just as true in us as in Him. Divine love flows from love, and reproduces itself in all who know the truth, that is, who know Christ. And this is love that we walk after His commandments. It means obedience to Him, and what else is obedience but love in exercise?

But why does he write all this? With the seventh verse he gives the reason and it is a very solemn one, indeed. Well may we look to these words in our own days for they have a great meaning for the children of God living in these closing days, as they had a meaning in the beginning of the dispensation. "For many deceivers are entered into the world, who confess not that Jesus Christ is come into the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist." This was true in the beginning of the age, and all through the present age the old serpent has made its many attempts to attack Christ and foster the lies concerning His person and glory, but never before has this been so evident as in our own days. The reason is that the age is about to

end. Denying that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh was mentioned by John in his First Epistle (chapter 4). It includes all phases of evil doctrines concerning Christ, the Son of the Father. It is a denial of His essential deity, His true humanity, His Virgin birth, His infallibility, His holy character, His physical resurrection, and His bodily presence in glory.

We need not mention again how many such antichrists are about in these days. And John brands them in plain words as deceivers. No matter what names they have, what scholarship and honors they claim, what beautiful characters they have assumed as natural men, if they deny anything about Christ, they are deceivers. He calls, therefore, to look diligently whether some of this awful leaven is not affecting them. If in any way they were contaminated with it they, John and the fellow teachers, might lose the full reward. (See 1 John 2:28). Then follow the instructions in verses 9-11.

"Whosoever transgresseth and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, he hath both the Father and the Son." Even the smallest error about the person of Christ is a transgression of the doctrine of Christ and if followed will lead to a complete rejection of the truth, as it has been so often seen in cases of apostates. Such deniers have not God, while he who abideth in the doctrine of Christ hath both the Father and the Son. After this declaration comes a divine command which is just as binding as any other command in the Word of God. "If there come any unto you, and bring not this doctrine, receive him not in your house, neither bid him Godspeak; for he that biddeth him Godspeak is partaker of his evil deeds."

This is strong language and yet not too strong when we remember what is at stake. Any one who brings not the doctrine of Christ, the doctrine as unfolded in the previous Epistle, concerning Christ the Son of God come in the flesh, dying for sinners and all that clusters around it, is an antichrist. Furthermore he makes God a liar and in denying the doctrine of Christ robs God of His glory and man of his salvation. And every man who denies the virgin birth, or teaches the peccability of Christ, or denies His physical resurrection is such a one. He must be shunned. Fellowship with him is an impossibility. He is not to be welcomed to any Christian home, nor is he to be given the common greeting. If met anywhere there is to be no acknowledgement whatever, not even a "Good Morning" or "Good Night." This is the meaning of the expression "Godspeak."

But is not this intolerant? Yes, the intolerance of divine love. If such deceivers are welcomed and fellowship is had with them even in the slightest degree, the believer puts his sanction on a denier of Christ. God will hold all responsible who fellowship any man, any set of men, any institution or anything else, which deny His Son and His glory. This is unpalatable to many. Nowadays it is called "Christian charity and broadmindedness" to mingle with Unitarians, critics, and baptized infidels of various descriptions. His honor and glory is in the background. Happy are we if we stand firm and refuse such fellowship practicing this divinely given injunction by the Apostle of love. God will be our rewarder.

"Having many things to write unto you, I would not write with paper and ink, but I trust to come unto you, and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of the elect sister greet thee. Amen." Thus ends the Second Epistle.

THE THIRD EPISTLE

The Third Epistle is addressed by the elder, the aged Apostle John, to a brother by name of Gaius. A Gaius is mentioned in Acts 19:29, 20:4, Romans 16:23 and 1 Corinthians 1:14. It is impossible to say whether this is the same. John calls him well-beloved, whom he loved in the truth. Thus he emphasizes the truth once more as he had done before. He wishes that he might prosper in his body, in health, as even his soul prospered. He had heard from the brethren who testified of the truth in him and that he walked in the truth. He rejoiced in this and declares "I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth." And this is not only the aged apostle's joy, but it is the joy of the Lord. How He must rejoice when His beloved children in whom He dwells walk in truth! Gaius had been very gracious and hospitable. Perhaps the brethren who gave such a good report to John were the recipients of Gaius's kindness. They had witnessed before the assembly how faithful he was in entertaining them, helping them on their journey in every way possible. He had done this not only with the brethren in his locality, but with brethren who were strangers, ministering servants of the Lord Jesus Christ, who went forth for His Name's sake, taking nothing of the Gentiles. In going forth in ministering the Word they depended on the Lord.

The evil of today, even among those who preach the truth, of demanding so much money for so much service was unknown in the Church. Nowhere do we read in the New Testament of a salaried ministry. The evils of going to the world for support of the Lord's work, or using the methods of the world are widespread and detrimental to true faith and a true testimony to the truth. The work of the Lord and the servants of Christ are to be supported only by the Lord's people and not by the unsaved. Such, then, who go forth for His Name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles (those who are outside) are to be received and those who receive them, help them on their journey as Gaius did, are fellow helpers to the truth. They are going to share in that coming day in the fruit of their labors. This is the true fellowship in the truth, as Paul expressed it in Galatians, "Let him that is taught in the Word communicate unto him that teaches in all good things" (Galatians 6:6). It is in contrast from what the Second Epistle demanded--withdrawal from those who bring not the doctrine of Christ, a complete separation from them; but here it is identification with those who know the truth and teach the truth.

This is a bright picture presented in Gaius. Alas! there is another side in this Third Epistle. There was one by name of Diotrephes. His name means "Nourished of God." Of him John writes as follows: "I wrote unto the church, but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, received us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words; and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and casteth them out of the church." We let another speak on this. "We have another evil designated very clearly here. Diotrephes is the scriptural example of the clerical tribe, as contra-distinguished from the ministry of Christ. There is no service, because there is no love. He is the representative of the spirit which opposes the free action of the Holy Spirit, setting itself even against apostolic authority in order to gain or maintain his own individual preeminence.

"Self-importance, jealousy of those over us, impatience of others

equally called to serve, scorn of the assembly, yet sometimes humoring the least worthy for its own ends--such are the characteristics of clericalism. I do not mean in clergymen only; for there are men of God incomparably better than their position tends to make them; as on the other hand this evil thing is nowhere so offensive as where the truth that is owned, wholly condemns it" (William Kelly). Diotrephes wanted to be the leader of the assembly, a kind of a pope in embryo. He loved the preeminence and this self-love and seeking to maintain his position led him to act so outrageously that he excommunicated the brethren and dared to rise up against the apostle himself. What harm such jealousies, self-seeking, self-glorification and ecclesiastical bossism have worked and are working in the body of Christ! and nowhere so much as in circles where the full truth is known and confessed. But why did Diotrephes love to have the preeminence? Because, unlike the apostle and the beloved Gaius, he did not give the Lord Jesus Christ the preeminence in all things; he did not walk in the truth. When the Lord comes, before His judgment-seat, all these things will be brought to light and dealt with by Him.

John does not leave us with the sad picture of Diotrephes. "Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God; but he that doeth evil hath not seen God." It is another one of the tests as we found them in the First Epistle. Doing good is the active service of love. God does not do evil, but He does good, hence if we do good as believers in truth, we are of God. Then he mentions Demetrius. Perhaps he was one of the servants who went about doing good, preaching the truth, and whom Diotrephes would not receive. How blessed that the Holy Spirit through John's letter endorses and recommends him. "Demetrius hath good report of all, and of the truth itself; yea, and we also bear record, and ye know that our record is true. " Such is the comfort of all true servants who walk in the truth, that the Lord knoweth. "I have many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee. But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name." Both Epistles end, with a coming face to face meeting. Let us remember there is to be some blessed day a "face to face" meeting, when the saints of God will meet together for eternal fellowship, but above all when we shall be face to face with Him. How soon it may be! But while we wait for that meeting may we walk in the light and in the fullest enjoyment of our fellowship with the Father and with His Son, our blessed Lord. To Him be glory and dominion for ever. Amen.

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