A Commentary on the Second Epistle of John

Ken Gardiner

Unless otherwise indicated, biblical quotations are from the
New International Version
© 1973, 1978, 1984 by the International Bible Society

The writer introduces himself as 'The Elder'; who is he? Leadership in the early Church was always corporate and in the hands of elders, so there was a recognised office of 'elder'. Basically the term means an older person, a 'senior citizen', and in the natural order of things most official 'elders' would be drawn from older and more experienced members of a church. Unlike apostles, evangelists and some prophets, their authority and responsibility were confined to one fellowship. Because the writer here is exerting authority over a wider sphere the term cannot be limited to the recognised office of elder. It may well be a term which was not bestowed in any official manner, but became attached to someone who, over the years, became greatly respected. The letter has long been associated with the first letter of John who, it is believed, lived at Ephesus. The question is, was it John the apostle or a second John? If it was the former, why did he not use the title of apostle? We just do not know. It may be simply that the term 'elder' just grew as one of respect and endearment, without anyone being aware of who had first used it. Obviously, however, he knew that his readers would immediately recognise his identity.

We are faced with a similar problem over who was the recipient of the letter. It is addressed to 'the elect lady' (eklete kuria). It is possible that either of these words is a name. Kuria is the feminine of kurios, meaning 'Lord', and which was often used of Jesus. So it would mean 'mistress' and so it could be to 'Mistress (or Lady) Electa'. Alternatively, her name might be Kyria and so the letter would be to 'the chosen Kyria'. However, whilst this is not impossible, the thrust of the whole letter implies that a group rather than an individual is involved. Most commentators believe that the letter is to a particular Church and the reference to children applies to individual members of the Church. We then have to ask why John chose to use such an unusual term? Perhaps it wasn't so unusual at that time and people often personified groups in this way. Or it may be that there was a certain amount of persecution of the Church and the writer hid both his own identity and that of his intended readers under the terms, 'elder' and 'chosen lady'.

John concentrates so much of his teaching on 'the truth'. For him truth is what is real and he has in mind the ultimate reality which is God. The Christian has a duty to love everyone but here he is thinking in particular of those who have come to understand, accept and surrender to that ultimate reality. There is, as there must be, an affinity between all such. It does not depend on feelings towards them but the fact that we share a common eternal inheritance. We have been seized by the same truth; or, to personalise it in biblical terms, we have been chosen in Christ. The great majority of people have not yet seen the truth, so there is a bond between those who have. John assures his readers not only of his love for them, but the love of all others who know the truth. In fact, it is more than just knowing the truth because to know it is to accept it and then that truth actually lives in us. He does not spell it out here, but John knows that this truth, this ultimate reality, is personal and is the person of the Holy Spirit takes up residence in us. More, because the ultimate reality is eternal, it will be with us for ever. Of course, this particular bond of love can only exist between those who share the truth. Heresy is unreal, so the truth must be preserved. The purpose and content of the letter rests on this. John will go on to explain something of what this love towards others in the truth demands, but also to warn against being seduced by heretics.

John follows the custom of the time in stating first from whom the letter comes, the writer's name, and then the recipient, but then he makes a change. Normally the names are followed by a greeting, a prayer "May grace be with you etc." This was so much the custom that to change it would be a surprise. Here John does not offer a prayer but makes a statement. He assures his readers that grace, mercy and peace will be with them. It is the grace which comes from God the Father and John adds that it comes also from Jesus

Christ, the Father's Son. John, perhaps more than any other New Testament writer, stresses the fact that Jesus was not simply the Messiah, the one anointed by God to be his servant, but that he was God's Son. That is to say, he was not a man chosen by God, as he had chosen Moses or one of the prophets, he actually shared God's nature. Once again, as in verse 1, he links truth and love. What is not clear is whether this is the condition of God's gifts of grace, mercy and truth being with us, (i.e. it depends on us living in love and truth) or whether it is the consequence (i.e. we shall find these gifts express themselves in love and truth) is uncertain and not very important, for all are linked together. We need the grace of God's acceptance and forgiveness, his mercy to help us who cannot help ourselves and the peace which comes from these in the knowledge that we have joined the company of the faithful who inherit the ultimate reality of the eternal life of God.

4-6

With the greetings out of the way, John now turns to the purpose of his writing. In fact, he opens with what seems to be a rather back handed compliment; he wants to begin with something encouraging, but the most he can honestly say is that he is glad to know (either from an earlier visit or by news reaching him) that some of the church members are walking in the truth. If someone said that to or of us we would think he was being sarcastic. Probably it would not appear so critical to John's readers at that time. However, there is the obvious implication that if it is only some of them who are walking in the truth, others are not. Instead of stating this openly and attacking those in error, he gives us an illustration of us how to approach all with whom we disagree - we love them. If that is true of our dealings with everyone, it is particularly so with regard to fellow believers. When will we learn that to seek to impose on others what we believe to be the truth simply puts them on the defensive and encourages them to take up entrenched positions? People are loved into the kingdom and its ways, not driven.

John is known as the disciple and apostle of love. In his gospel, his detailed description of the last hour or two which Jesus spent with his disciples (or the eleven once Judas had left the gathering) returns time and again to Christ's command that his followers must love one another and live in unity. He repeats here what he said in his first letter (2:7-11), he is not giving them a new command, but the one on which the Christian faith is founded - we are to love one another (by the use of the pronoun 'we' John includes himself). However, we are also to love God and as Christ said, "If you love me, you will obey what I command." John completes the circle of the argument by stating the first command to walk in love. In v. 4 he speaks of walking in truth, in v. 6 of walking in love and he says that both are God's commands; the two go together.

7

With that circle complete he can now begin to spread outwards, referring to other commands of God. Obviously we are to guard the truth as it has been revealed in Jesus; our love towards others does not mean that we are to tolerate heresy. So John warns that there are deceivers about who do not acknowledge that Jesus is the Christ come in the flesh. He dealt with this heresy in his first letter (1:1-3 and 4:1-3) and there is no need to comment further here, except to note that there the tense of the verb was in the past (he has come) here it is in the present (literally he is coming or is to come). Some commentators take this as a reference to Christ's second coming. It is true that he will come again, but it would be strange for John to stress that this will be 'in the flesh'. It is vital to preserve the truth that in his first coming he was conceived, lived and died as both man and God; but when he comes again, revealed as the Lord and king he is, it will be in his resurrection body and there would be no need for John to argue against the deceivers on that ground. Stott make the point that by using the word 'gone out', it is as though John

sees the deceivers being sent out by Satan the antichrist, aping the disciples who were sent out into the world by Jesus.

8-9

Where there is life there is always change. This is so in every sphere. Our culture today is different from that of the time of Christ; apart from anything else we understand so much more about the universe, how it works. Therefore our faith has constantly to be reinterpreted. The basic truth does not change but we have to apply it to changed circumstances. This is good because our faith is a living experience not a set of sterile doctrines. However, there is always the danger that in seeking to apply and reinterpret our faith to changed situations, we may depart from the basic unchanging truth. John is concerned that some of the believers may be taken in by the teaching of the heretics who were claiming a greater knowledge or understanding of God, and he warns them to be on their guard so that they do not lose their reward. In speaking of 'what you have worked for' John cannot be speaking of salvation, which is a free gift of God. However, Christ taught that believers are to be rewarded for their faithful deeds; there is to be the 'well done, good and faithful servant,' and he does not want them to lose that. However, there is a linguistic problem here. Manuscripts vary between the first and second person plural and we cannot be sure whether it is 'we do not lose' or 'you do not lose' etc. The general view is that 'you' is more reliable at the beginning and the end of the sentence ('you do not lose' and 'you may be rewarded') but there is uncertainty about the middle phrase; should it be 'what we have worked for' or 'what you have worked for'? Phillips translates it, "don't throw away all the labour that has been spent on you, but persevere till God gives you your reward." If that is what John meant then it may refer to their salvation because then he is not speaking to their own work but to the labour of others in bringing them the truth of Christ.

John develops this thought by speaking of the danger of 'running ahead'. Probably he is quoting a term with the heretics may have used in promoting their claims that they were further advanced in knowledge of God. Perhaps they reasoned that Jesus was simply a man used by God to point us to himself, and once you had come to 'know God', you didn't need Christ anymore; you had advanced beyond that! John refutes that heresy. It is not certain whether the phrase, "the teaching of Christ," refers to the teaching about Christ or to the teaching given by Christ: the latter is the more common meaning but in this context the former would seem more appropriate. Whichever is correct, John stresses that you cannot come to God without Christ. He states this boldly without further explanation but one reason for that is not only that Christ is the perfect revelation of God, but also that God is of purer eyes than even to look on evil and until we are redeemed by the blood of Christ we cannot draw near to God. As Jesus said, he and his Father are one; a person who truly has the one has also the other.

10-11

Although these verses seem clear in what they instruct they are not easy to interpret and put into effect today. The problem lies in maintaining the faith yet showing love. If we were never to have any dealings at all with those of other faiths, or who hold heretical views of Christianity, there would be no missionaries and those we believe to be in error would never hear the truth. How literally are we to take John's instruction not to allow such people into our houses? It may be that he does not, in fact, mean to imply that they are to be barred from every Christian home but that, because the early Church usually met in a house, he is instructing the believers not to allow these teachers to come amongst them while they are gathered together to worship. Visiting prophets would normally be given the opportunity to share but this courtesy was not to be extended to these deceivers, indeed no official greeting was to be given them. It was to be made very clear that such

people were no part of the Church. Perhaps they had recently been in the area where John lived and, knowing they had now left setting off in a particular direction, he was writing to warn the believers there not to have anything to do with them. It seems that what John has in mind are those who come with the deliberate intention to teach their false doctrines. Surely we would be wrong to seek to apply these instructions in a legalistic manner, so that it prevented us inviting into our homes anyone of a different faith for a cup of coffee or a meal. If John were writing the same warning to a Church today he would probably say something like, "Do not allow such people into your pulpit or give them any official recognition because you will simply be furthering their evil cause."

12-13

Almost certainly the letter filled just one piece of papyrus and John has only enough room for his final greeting. Although he apparently has much he would like to share, he explains that he hopes to visit them and speak 'mouth to mouth' or, as we say today, 'face to face.' Barclay comments wisely that whenever possible it is better to meet and speak than to put matters in writing. Facial expression and tone of voice help in conveying what we truly mean and there is less opportunity for misunderstanding. In any case, John looks forward to the joy of fellowship with these fellow believers for whom he has such concern.

If 'the chosen lady and her children' to whom he writes (mentioned in v. 1) are, as we believe, a church and its members, then John is sending the greetings of the church (the 'chosen sister') and its members where he is at the time (Ephesus?).

© Ken Gardiner August 2003