

Brief Notes on the Epistle of 2 John

by Brian Coatney

The thirteen verse letter of 2 John to an elect lady and her children can almost escape notice as an after thought, considering the depth and obvious weight of John's other writings. Here he writes some noble lady who is full of wisdom and rich in maternal understanding. For John, love and truth exist together inseparably as one, and his elect lady knows full well that very thing. Truth means a person and the nature of that person; and the point for us as created beings means nothing short of that person and nature dwelling in us in a union that John says will continue forever.

As such, John identifies these persons as God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, the Father's son. John's meaning here is that in eternity, the Father begot Christ as deity out of deity, one from Himself, and therefore deity as well, who existed fully as deity, before the creation of angels or man. Pretenders to union with God maintain that Jesus was an ordinary man, a carpenter, who became Jesus the Christ, showing the way for any other human to do the same, as if by metaphysics, one can attain god-hood, which is to say, anyone can progress along an evolutionary path to deity, without the atoning sacrifice and body death of a savior who is both God and man.

John did not have to elaborate like this to the elect lady, for she, as a woman of great wisdom, knew full well what John meant. So John can write using compact, but poetic phrasing, like “in truth and love,” knowing that she will understand him. Knowing her as one grounded in true union, he blesses her with grace, mercy, and peace from God the Father and Jesus Christ the son.

Now John begins to comment on the children of this mother in faith: “I rejoiced greatly that I found of thy children walking in the truth, as we have received a commandment from the Father.” The NASB handles the enigmatic wording this way: “I was very glad to find *some* of your children walking in the truth, just as we have received commandment from the father to do.” As one can see, the translation possibilities hang on what John means: does he mean that some of the elect lady’s children walk in the truth?; or does he mean that he has met some of her children and finds them walking in the truth? In the first case, he implies, without pointing a finger, that indeed some of her children walk in the truth, knowing full well that no mother can guarantee the fidelity of all her children, despite the best of instruction. In the latter case, he merely means that he met some out of her congregation and thinks, “My, her children mirror well what she has poured into them.”

John then takes on a sensitive point, stressful in all ages, and not new to any present politically correct generation: we are to love one another, and that love manifests itself in walking after the commandment. The “obedience of faith” and love go together inseparably, so that one may not say, “I love God in my heart but

do not walk in His way.” Neither does love say, “I love my brother but do not judge him by taking a stand that he actually should live as he talks.” So-called new ideas always appear, as if to say that love just nurtures along the sinner in his sin without any expectation or boundary with a view toward desiring repentance. Worse, that direction leads into such folly as false faith that says, “I do not see the sin,” or “There is no sin.”

Paul addresses these issues as well with the Corinthians, telling them that he does not mean that they should disassociate from sinners in the world who do not even claim to be Christians, but rather he means that they address discipline to those in the house of God. So incongruous as it might look, a Christian might associate with sinners, but reject the fellowship of those claiming to be Christians but living in sin that is obvious to the most simple of Christians. Neither Paul nor John means such discipline for the self-life, that hangs on in a Christian as grave clothes, but the Biblical writers mean flagrant sin that stands out clearly like the sun in the sky.

John immediately goes on to point out what we find true in every generation—that deceivers enter into union fellowship, “who confess not that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” John calls this both deception and antichrist. What does “Jesus Christ is come in the flesh” mean? First, it means as John implied earlier, that Christ, the Son of the Father from eternity, came in human flesh and lived as a man, both of the eternal world from which He came, and

existed fully as a man in this world, with flesh and blood, so that He lived God's very life in manifest form as a human.

Jesus Christ, therefore, was not an ordinary man who by spiritual development turned himself into a god and showed us how to do the same. This implies in absolute manner also that no reconciliation with God occurs but by the atonement of Christ as both God and man for sin, which John writes about in detail elsewhere.

Second, "Jesus Christ is come in the flesh" leads back to John's earlier statement, "which dwelleth in us." In other words, Christ came in the flesh so that by His unique sacrifice, He could come dwell in our flesh and manifest Himself by our abiding in Him, which simply means coming to an end of resistance to His life, expressed by both word and deed once we receive Him into ourselves in a new birth.

John then says, "Look to yourselves, that we lose not those things which we have wrought, but that we receive a full reward." This can mean two things. First, John encourages the elect lady to continue her stand against deceivers so that her children will have the better opportunity of continuing on in the faith without taking a road into deception, wherein so called "love" gets perverted by the demand for tolerance of even the most flagrant and obvious sins committed by those professing union with God. John soberly writes, "Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God."

We do well to note that as in John's day, the name of Christ gets used and applied to more people and deeds than probably any name in history. What person wants to be outside the pale of the

name "Christ"? So the name "Christ" can easily get taken over by the kind of deceivers John mentions. The deception of the deceivers can even work its way into the body of Christ as a leaven that promotes love in ways that the Christian so doing could have never imagined in his or her early days as a Christian, when the obviousness of truth and sin lay as simply straightforward as ABC.

I would like here to say what kind of deception I think John has in mind and clearly implies in all his writings. First, I think that John means the error that Christ is already in every man, but he does not know it and needs only to wake up to who he already is. This kind of teaching, even if it posits the deity of Christ and His unique atonement to reconcile God and man, supposes every person saved apart from the Biblical mandate that Paul gives in 2 Corinthians 5, where he says that though God is reconciled to mankind through Christ's sacrifice, one must accordingly choose and reconcile toward God. The folly of ignoring this leads to pronouncing people Christians before they really are, when in fact they may never become Christians. Yet equally true, the Holy Spirit can lead us to a word of faith about certain ones that they will be saved. But one cannot be saved before being saved.

Second, John makes clear in his first epistle that before one is a child of God, one is a child of the devil. One need not read too far in that first epistle to get hit stunningly with that notion. The identity of the non-Christian stands in no doubt: we were all enslaved and owned by the devil, and those who receive Christ and abide in Him enter the new birth and son-ship. To me, one of the most

frightening things about the church is the probable number of those thinking that they are Christians on the basis of mental assent of some kind. I would like to raise the question, "Is it realistic to assume that one is indeed a Christian when sin patterns continue for long periods of time with no desperation over them? Paul describes the Romans 7 waking up to the law, sin, and the misery of wanting out of bondage, without finding it until crying out "Who will deliver me?" But here sin is called sin, and the heart of the testifier wrenchingly longs for true holiness in his members.

We often think of James as the practical writer, but do not John and Paul both say the same thing? He who knows, knows how to do by faith; and he who does not do does not know. John writes to the elect lady, his good and noble friend, that she need not, truly should not, let the viper doctrine of "Everyone is already Christ in the flesh" into her home to teach her people. Such people will not clearly teach who Jesus Christ is; they will not teach what sin really is and how to repent of it; and they will assert that everyone in the world is already Christ without knowing it. Allowing such teaching into the church makes one a partaker of the evil.

John ends his letter briefly with the expression that he has many things to talk over with his dear friend, but he looks forward to doing so face to face with her. You, as reader of my brief notes (many times longer than the short letter itself) might think that I have superimposed onto John what he does not really say. However, I think that John wrote a short letter, laden with obvious implication, to a lady reader who knew full well the fuller exposition

of what he meant. By no means do I think she read his short letter with surprise and scratched her head puzzled over its basic meaning, which meaning I have set forth here as I believe he clearly meant.