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The Case Study of the Elect Lady

2 John

The book of 1 John does not exhaust everything John has to teach us about Christian discipleship. The letter certainly functions as a foundational handbook for learning Christian discipleship—as we have seen so far in our study—but John also wrote two additional letters called 2 John and 3 John that build on what he wrote in 1 John.

To understand how 2 and 3 John fit together with 1 John, it is helpful to think of them as case studies where John's discipleship training is put into practice. So, in 1 John, the apostle had written a general letter without any specific context, making it easily shared among a broad variety of Christians—even those of us who are living two thousand years after he wrote it. But in 2 and 3 John, we will now see John writing to specific groups of people who lived in specific places and who faced specific challenges in ministry and life. This specificity doesn't mean that 2 and 3 John are irrelevant to those of us living in different contexts—in fact, it is quite the opposite. Instead, 2 and 3 John provide real, concrete situations to help us understand what it looks like to follow Jesus in the midst of theological controversies (2 John) and personality conflicts (3 John).

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So now, as we study these letters together, may God give us eyes to see, ears to hear, and hearts to understand all that is contained in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

LOVING ONE ANOTHER IN TRUTH

One unique aspect of 1 John is that it does not include the typical kind of greeting we find in other New Testament letters. In fact, 1 John is the only letter in the New Testament that does not contain any kind of greeting at all to the original recipients of the letter.¹ Instead, John had opened his first letter with a preface in which he immediately began bearing witness to Jesus Christ, the word of life who had been manifested in their midst.

But now in 2 John—and again in 3 John—John does write a more formal, typical greeting that sounds much more like what we find in the other New Testament letters. He identifies himself as “the elder,” and he names the recipients of his letter as a group of people he calls “the elect lady and her children”:

¹The elder to the elect lady and to her children, whom I love in truth, and not I only but also all those who have come to know the truth, ²because the truth *is* abiding in us and will be with us forever. ³Grace, 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 1:1–3)

THE IDENTITY OF THE ELECT LADY

So, who is this “elect lady,” and who are her children (2 John 1:1)? While it is possible that the “elect lady” refers to a single person so that “her children” are this woman’s biological children, there are a few reasons for thinking that the “elect lady” is in fact a church and that the “children” are the members of the church.

First, John frequently used this word for “children” (*teknia*) in 1 John to refer to his own spiritual children (1 John 2:1, 28;

3:7, 18; 4:4; 5:21). John's normal use of the word *teknia* is to refer to spiritual children, not biological children.

Second, it would be difficult to understand the children in 2 John 1:13 as referring to biological nieces and nephews: "The children of your elect sister greet you." Why only the children? Wouldn't the "elect sister" also send her greetings if these two women were biological sisters? It seems easier to understand this as an extended metaphor to describe the members of two churches rather than the members of two related families.

Third, throughout the Old Testament, and even in the New Testament, the people of God are referred to as a woman, whether as a wife, bride, mother, or daughter or simply as "she."² In the context of the rest of the Bible, it is natural to read the "elect lady" as a reference to a church.

**THE TRUTH
OF THE LOVE OF JESUS CHRIST,
THE SON OF THE FATHER**

In 2 John 1:3, John closes out the opening section of his letter by offering a benediction where he defines the essence of the truth in terms of love. In this blessing, he writes that "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 1:3). This sounds virtually identical to any of the introductory benedictions from the other letters in the Scriptures by Paul or Peter, but there are five unique features in what John says here that make this particular greeting stand out.³ After we survey these features, we'll explore why John writes such a distinctive greeting in verse 3.

First, other New Testament greetings are written as expressions of a wish or a desire, but here John uses a confident future tense. For example, Paul and Peter typically do not use any verb at all, writing their greetings to sound something like this: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Romans 1:7). But in 2 John 1:3, the

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apostle uses the future tense to convey the certainty of his statement: “Grace, mercy, and peace *will* be with us.” This is more than a desire—it’s an announcement of a fact.

Second, between the words *grace* and *peace*, John adds the word *mercy*, a word we find only in the greetings that Paul writes in 1 and 2 Timothy. *Mercy* describes the reality that God has not treated us as we deserved to be treated because of our sins (i.e., badly), while *grace* describes God’s unmerited favor toward us (i.e., he treats us well). *Peace* refers to our new status as those who have received both grace and mercy, cleansed from all sin and unrighteousness by the blood of Jesus (1 John 1:7, 9) and made recipients of eternal life through the witness of the Holy Spirit, who gives us Jesus Christ (1 John 5:6–12).

Third, John adds the words “the Son of the Father,” affirming the trinitarian theology he wrote about in 1 John 2:18–28, where he asserted that anyone who denies that Jesus is the Son of the Father is the antichrist. Fourth, John adds the phrase “in truth and love,” which (as we shall see) are the two theme virtues of 2 John. No other New Testament greeting contains the phrase “the Son of the Father” or the phrase “in truth and love.”

Fifth, this is the only greeting in the entire New Testament that specifically states that the grace, mercy, and peace (or any combination of such divine blessings) come from God the Father and *from* Jesus Christ. Very often Jesus Christ is also named, but it will sound something like this: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 1:7), without using another word for “from” to name Jesus explicitly as the source of grace and peace. In other places, only the Father is named as the source of blessing: “Grace to you and peace from God our Father” (Colossians 1:2).

This last change from the standard New Testament greeting is very interesting, and it gives us insight into the overall reason that John has so carefully written his greeting. John is emphatic that we recognize Jesus Christ as the source

of these divine gifts and graces because that means that Jesus is equal with his Father as the origin of all blessings. This is implied in the other New Testament greetings, so we shouldn't think the theology of the other letters is somehow deficient; however, only John goes out of his way to specify that grace, mercy, and peace come from the Father and from Jesus Christ the Son of the Father.

What's behind all this for John? R. C. H. Lenski explains:

But there is a point in the repetition of [the word *from*] and in the naming of the two Givers: "from God (the) Father and from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father." These two are equal.... John purposely repeats "the Father" in order to convey fully what he means by Jesus Christ's being "the Son" of the Father. The antichristian heresy of the deceivers made Jesus the physical son of Joseph.⁴

Against the heretics that denied the full authority of Jesus by making him inferior to the Father as the son of someone else, John announces the supremacy of Christ: Jesus is equal with the Father because he is the Son of the Father. Jesus is the fountainhead from whom all blessings flow, and Jesus is the one through whom we will receive grace, mercy, and peace—in the truth of Jesus and from the love of Jesus.

As we will see clearly in 2 John 1:7–11, the apostle writes this letter largely because he has identified dangerous, false teaching and he wants to warn the children of the elect lady against it. The false teachers refused to acknowledge the full glory of Jesus (2 John 1:7, 9), but John insists that we experience no blessing whatsoever apart from the full, unadulterated truth of Jesus Christ.

THE COMMONALITY OF TRUTH AND LOVE

But let's take a step back to see the bigger picture of what John has packed into three short verses. In the greetings of 2 John 1:1–3, the apostle is laying the foundation for the theme he wants to discuss in this letter: the tight connection

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between truth and love.⁵ He insists that he loves the elect lady in truth and that all who know the truth also love the elect lady. Why? Because truth unites people eternally: “the truth is abiding in us and will be with us forever” (2 John 1:2). Truth is the commonality in which God’s people enjoy mutual love and fellowship together. Then, in his benediction, John writes that the blessings of God come to us in truth (i.e., the truth that Jesus is the eternal Son of the Father) and love (i.e., the grace, mercy, and peace of Jesus).

We shouldn’t think truth and love are new subjects to which John is introducing us in 2 John because John discussed both of these topics thoroughly in 1 John. Recall the fact that truth was the very first subject in 1 John 1:1–4 and that John continued urging us to know the truth throughout his letter (1 John 1:1–4; 2:18–27; 4:1–6; 5:1–12, 20). Additionally, John insisted on the necessity of loving one another over and over in 1 John (1 John 2:7–11, 3:11–24, 4:7–21, 5:16–17).

But while it is very clear that John wrote about truth and love in 1 John, it is also the case that John never actually clarified in his first letter *how* truth and love fit together. He simply insisted that both are necessary, and he spent his time teaching about truth and love individually.

Here in 2 John, however, the apostle reveals to us that love and truth are deeply connected. Everyone who has come to know the truth is drawn to mutual love for one another, and their mutual love is shaped and defined by the truth. Certainly, love and truth are very different from each other, but they balance, rather than cancel, each other out. You cannot separate them, and if you try to cling to only one while excluding the other, you will end up losing both.

Of course, this is a bit surprising. Truth, on the one hand, is an immovable object. We can’t bargain with truth, manipulate truth, or compromise with truth, because the moment we alter truth in the least, it ceases to qualify as truth. Truth is absolute, unbendable, unchangeable, and fixed—we can take it or leave it, but the one thing we can’t do is change it.

Love, on the other hand, is an unstoppable force. Love characteristically overlooks flaws and shortcomings. Love doesn't say, "Take it or leave it," but rather, "Whatever it takes." Love refuses to walk away, choosing instead to pursue, woo, and overcome any barriers whatsoever that stand in the way of reconciliation.

In 2 John, the apostle unfolds for us how each virtue needs the other. Love must temper truth, and truth must strengthen love.

IN JESUS, LOVE WINS

But doesn't there come a point where either truth or love has to give? When push comes to shove, which wins out? Should truth remain fixed and immovable, or should love's unstoppable force prevail? At the end of the day, to which virtue does God give a higher priority? And to which side should we err when we are forced to choose between the two?

John begins to answer this question by affirming the necessity of love. Here is what John writes in 2 John 1:4–6:

⁴I rejoiced greatly that I have found *some* of your children walking in truth, just as we received the commandment from the Father. ⁵And now I ask, Lady, not as a new command I am writing to you but *one* which we have had from the beginning, that we should love one another. ⁶And this is the love, that we should walk according to his commandments. This is the commandment, just as you have heard from the beginning, that in this you should walk. (2 John 1:4–6)

In verse 4, John defines "walking in truth" as obedience to "the commandment from the Father." Then, in verse 5, John explicitly names the commandment that he is talking about: "not as a new command I am writing to you but one which we have had from the beginning, that we should love one another." Just as he did in 1 John 2:7, John identifies love as the commandment that we have had from the beginning, but

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here he also explains that obedience to this commandment to love is the definition of what it means to walk in truth. We cannot walk in truth unless we obey God's commandment to love one another.

What this means is that truth isn't purely an intellectual exercise, where your only job is to get your facts straight. Instead, real truth fuels warmth, affection, and deep concern for your brothers and sisters in the truth. As a perfect example of this principle, John describes how he himself rejoices in love for his fellow believers when he sees some of the lady's children walking in truth. His passion for seeing other people walk in truth creates his deep love for them.

Seeing this connection between truth and love helps us immensely to understand the nature of the gospel. As we talked about in the very first chapter of this book, truth is a person, not some vague knowledge that stays aloof from us, hidden in some far corner of the universe. Truth himself—the person of Jesus Christ—was not willing to remain distant from us in the heaven of heavens, passively waiting for someone righteous enough to earn entry into his presence. Rather, his own love compelled him to pursue his people no matter what it would cost him.

In Jesus, love *does* win.

But in Jesus, truth wins too.

IN JESUS, TRUTH WINS TOO

For John, love cannot be the complete, final word, because truth *always* balances out love. When serious threats arise contrary to the truth of Jesus Christ, truth compels love to face those problems directly. For this reason, John concludes his short letter with a strict warning:

⁷For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess Jesus Christ having come in the flesh. This one is the deceiver and the antichrist.

⁸Watch yourselves, that you may not lose what we have worked for but that you may receive a full reward.

⁹Everyone *who* goes ahead and does not remain in the teaching of Christ does not have God. The one *who* abides in the teaching, this one has both the Father and the Son. ¹⁰If someone comes to you and does not bring that teaching, do not receive him into your house and do not speak a greeting to him. ¹¹For the one *who* speaks a greeting to him has fellowship in his wicked works.

¹²Having many things to write to you, I do not wish *to write* through paper and ink, but I hope to come to you and to speak face-to-face, that our joy may be filled up. ¹³The children of your elect sister greet you. (2 John 1:7–13)

The background behind what John writes here is that, in his day, Christian missionaries would move from city to city, receiving food and lodging from other Christians living in the city where they were doing ministry. This network of hospitality was critical for providing the basic needs of the missionaries who were among the first to announce the gospel of Jesus to the wider world, but there were several challenges with this system. John Stott helpfully explains that these problems were the motivation for John to write 2 and 3 John:

Such hospitality [toward traveling missionaries] was open to easy abuse, however. There was the false teacher, on the one hand, who yet posed as a Christian: should hospitality be extended to him? And there was the more obvious mountebank, the false prophet with false credentials, who was dominated less by the creed he had to offer than by the material profit and free board and lodging that he hoped to gain. It is against this background that we must read the Second and Third Epistles of John, for in them the Elder issues instructions concerning whom to welcome and whom to refuse, and why.⁶

It is not love, John explains, to welcome false teachers into your midst. Love craves boundaries, adamant about

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preventing poisonous teaching from taking root in the church. So, truth teaches love how to recognize the ways false teaching is destructive, harmful, and deadly.

Practically, truth also warns love against extending hospitality too quickly to anyone who might bring such dangers into the church. In fact, truth refuses to let us even “speak a greeting” to a false teacher, because to do so could imply some level of commonality with that false teacher—and therefore, with their false teaching—which would be tantamount to “fellowship in his wicked works” (2 John 1:10–11). Truth guides love to recognize that even something as innocent as a greeting to such a false teacher would be confusing and destructive to the children of God who might not be capable of differentiating truth from error yet.

We should notice, however, that John does not focus his opposition against the victims of this false teaching (those who have been deceived by false teachers) but rather toward those who do the deceiving. As Christians, we are called to deal gently with those who are in error, in the hopes that they may eventually be saved. For example, Paul writes this admonition to Timothy:

²⁴And the Lord’s servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, ²⁵correcting his opponents with gentleness. God may perhaps grant them repentance leading to a knowledge of the truth, ²⁶and they may come to their senses and escape from the snare of the devil, after being captured by him to do his will. (2 Timothy 2:24–26)

There are many who are deceived, and if we ignored everyone who did not already have a perfect understanding of the truth, no one would ever hear the saving message of Jesus Christ. With those who do not know Jesus, we should be patient and kind, praying that God will grant them repentance that leads to a knowledge of the truth. In 2 John, the apostle is singling out the false *teachers*, not those who are

falsely *taught*, as deceivers and antichrists, unworthy of our greetings.

But at the same time, we cannot minimize the fact that anyone who embraces false teaching faces severe consequences as well. John pleads with this church: “Watch yourselves, that you may not lose what we have worked for but that you may receive a full reward” (2 John 1:8). Then, he clearly states the full implications of what is at stake here: “Everyone who goes ahead and does not remain in the teaching of Christ does not have God” (2 John 1:9). John does not fight for the truth in this congregation because he enjoys fighting; he fights for the truth because no one can “have God” apart from the truth of Jesus Christ. Out of deep love for this church, John contends for the full truth in their midst.

Quite simply, the truth that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not a debatable issue. Instead, the truth of Jesus Christ is life itself. As John wrote in 1 John 5:12, “The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have life.” Jesus Christ’s coming in the flesh is the only message that gives life to broken, needy sinners like us.

Those who love this truth have eternal life because everyone who has the Son (who himself is truth) has life. Those who reject this truth (i.e., those who reject the Son who came in the flesh) are left only with death because everyone who does not have the Son of God does not have life. There is no third option, and John is calling us to choose life, that we might live.

Truth teaches love that real, genuine care and compassion are impossible if we tolerate the poison of false teaching to fester within the church. Truth shows love how to guard one another well, so that we do not lose what we have worked for and so that we all may win a full reward. Truth reminds love that our only lasting good is found in the full, robust teaching of Jesus Christ, through whom we are reconciled to the Father by the power of the Holy Spirit.

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In Jesus, truth wins too.

But here's how this balancing act between truth and love works, practically speaking. On the one hand, truth gives love the courage to stand against the deceivers and antichrists who teach a form of spirituality yet deny (or simply "do not confess") the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. But on the other hand, love never lets truth forget the ultimate purpose behind contending for doctrine: the glory of God and the good of the flock.

Truth calls everyone to repent from sin in order to join the fellowship of those who walk in the truth. Truth insists that salvation comes only through the gospel of Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of the Father who has come in the flesh. Truth demands that we follow the straight path of God's commandment to love one another. But unfailingly, love throws the door open wide, pursuing sinners with the gospel and urging them to turn from their sin in order to gain Jesus.

If we want to know what a perfect blend of truth and love looks like, we should look to Jesus at the cross. There, Jesus went to affirm the truthfulness of God's holiness and his righteous judgment in wrath against our sin by embracing all that we deserved, dying in our place. At the cross, Jesus exalted the goodness of truth with deadly seriousness, fulfilling every last bit of the holy law of God and being crushed by the immovable object of God's truth in the process.

But at the cross, Jesus also became the unstoppable force of God's love, doing every last thing it took to purchase his people back from sin, death, and the dominion of Satan. Jesus refused to walk away from us, but he pursued us all the way to hell, tasting the full horror of death for us so that we would not.

And if in this way God loved us in truth, we also ought to love one another—in the relentless pursuit of the truth of Jesus Christ together.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. When you think about God, do you imagine that he prioritizes love or truth?
2. What is a specific situation in your life where your truth needs to be tamed by love, or where your love needs to be guided by truth? What would it look like to strike a balance in that situation?

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in 4:3: “every spirit that does not confess *the* Jesus having come in the flesh is not from God” to differentiate the having-come-in-flesh Jesus from the various false versions of Jesus promoted by the prophets of the spirit of error.

3. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1996), 39.
4. Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 163.

CHAPTER 9: FAITH (1 JOHN 5:1–12)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 172.
2. John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied* (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1961), 103.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 372.

CHAPTER 10: PRAYER (1 JOHN 5:13–17)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 185.
2. Jeremiah 7:16–18, 11:14, 14:11; see also Kruse, *Letters of John*, 193.
3. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 534–35, emphasis added.

CHAPTER 11: ETERNAL LIFE (1 JOHN 5:18–21)

1. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 393.
2. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 194.
3. Appian, *The Civil Wars*, book 1, §120.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 544–45.

CHAPTER 12: THE CASE STUDY OF THE ELECT LADY (2 JOHN)

1. The only other New Testament letter that does not

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contain a greeting at the beginning of the letter is Hebrews, but Hebrews does contain a few greetings at the very end of the letter, while 1 John does not include greetings from the author to specific recipients at any point.

2. Kruse, *Letters of John*, 205.
3. The first four of these deviations are found in Stott, *Epistles of John*, 203–5.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 559–60.
5. Donald Burdick writes, “This double emphasis [on truth and love] sets the tone for the entire letter as John proceeds to show the careful balance in which these two elements of the Christian life must be held.” Burdick, *Letters of John*, 431. In this chapter, I draw heavily from Burdick’s extended section on the relationship between truth and love (pp. 431–33).
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 199.

CHAPTER 13: THE CASE STUDY OF GAIUS AND DIOTREPHES (3 JOHN)

1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 198, 213.
2. Kruse, *Letters of John*, 220.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 460–61.
4. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 17.
5. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 577.
6. E.g., Stott, *Epistles of John*, 224–25; Burdick, *Letters of John*, 444; Kruse, *Letters of John*, 226.
7. E.g., Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 588; Burdick, *Letters of John*, 463.
8. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 454.