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**Comments on
the 2nd Epistle of John**

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By F.B. Hole

BEFORE WE COME to the details of this short Epistle we may point out several features of a more general nature.

The Author's name is not mentioned. This feature characterizes also the first and third Epistles, yet in each case there can be no doubt that John is the writer. The style is identical, agreeing also with the Gospel that bears his name. It is quite remarkable that not once does John mention his own name in his writings, save in the Revelation. Yet there is something very fitting in this. His Gospel and Epistles deal with such a transcendent theme — God revealed in One, who was no less than "the Son of the Father" — that the human writer is not noticed in the glory of that light.

This second Epistle, as also the third, comes in as a kind of appendix or postscript to the first Epistle. It was evidently in the

first place a communication of a private nature to a certain Christian lady and her family, but has been brought by God into permanency in the pages of Scripture, because it supplies very needful instruction not found elsewhere. It is the only Epistle addressed to a woman, and the instruction gains force from that fact.

In verses 1 and 2 the greatest possible emphasis is laid upon truth. The Epistle itself gives directions as to the action necessary for the defence of the truth; and the first thing we find is that all Christian relationships and affections are founded upon truth, and are to be governed by it. The love that is proper to Christians is "in the truth;" since it springs forth as the fruit of our having been begotten of God, as the first Epistle has shown us. Being begotten of God we are "in Him that is true," and love according to truth springs up within our hearts. Therefore the love, that John bore toward the elect lady and her children, found a place also in the hearts of all those who had been brought to a knowledge of the truth, as begotten of God.

But that love not only found its origin in the knowledge of the truth, it also found expression "for the truth's sake." The truth is of surpassing importance — since the world is filled with error

and delusion — and we should be ready to suffer for the sake of it. Many have suffered, even to a martyr's death. Here, however, it is not a question of suffering for the sake of the truth, but loving for the sake of the truth. That bears in two directions: the love must be sincere and without the partiality which is so natural to the flesh; and also it must be intolerant of evil, since truth and error can never agree together. It is the second of these two considerations which is stated in this Epistle. The third Epistle deals with the first.

The two statements as to the truth, which verse 2 contains, are very pregnant with meaning. The truth (1) "dwells in us." and (2) "shall be with us for ever." We connect the two thoughts with two sayings: that of the first Epistle, "the Spirit is truth," and the saying of our Lord in the Gospel, "I am the truth."

The truth "dwells in us," inasmuch as the Spirit indwells us, and He is truth. He is not mentioned in this short Epistle, but He is implied in these words. He is truth subjectively, within us; for He does not speak "of" or "from" Himself, but He glorifies Christ who is the truth, and taking of His things He ministers them to us. Hence every Spirit-indwelt believer has truth

dwelling in him — an immense privilege and preservative in a world of error.

This fact leads us to the conclusion that the detection and refusal of evil doctrine is not for the believer primarily a matter of intellect or brainpower. It is primarily a matter of what we may call spiritual instinct. Mere intellect again and again leads even true believers astray. All the errors, that have afflicted the church during her nineteen centuries of history, have been in the first place launched by men of intellectual prowess. And on the other hand, very unlettered believers, when false teaching has been pressed upon them, have been heard to say, "Well, I can't help feeling it is all wrong, though I don't understand their ideas and cannot criticize them." This fact justifies the Apostle in writing the instructions of this Epistle to even a lady and her children.

It is also a fact, thank God, that the truth "shall be with us for ever," inasmuch as Christ is the truth objectively, and we are never to be separated from Him. Truth as well as grace fully arrived on the scene when the Lord Jesus came. In Him all that God is stands fully disclosed. In Him light and truth shine about everything, and the darkness, the error, the unrealities

disappear. As we turn our eyes upon Jesus we contemplate the One in whom truth is personified. The truth is "with us," to be considered and adoringly admired, and by which, as a standard, everything may be tested.

This is of deep importance to us at the present time, while Satan the deceiver is still at large. Yet we shall ever need the truth personified before our eyes, and He is to be with us for ever. Let us not forget for present emergencies that He as the truth is the test for everything that may be presented to us in the way of doctrine, and that the Spirit who indwells us, forming our instincts, is truth likewise.

Since Christ is the truth objectively before our eyes all the error of which Satan is the originator is aimed, whether directly or indirectly, at Him. Not without reason therefore is His glory so fully unfolded in verse 3. Jesus is stated to be not only Lord and Christ but also "the Son of the Father." This is the only place where this exact expression occurs, though He is frequently called the Son of God. The Father of our Lord Jesus Christ has many families both in heaven and earth, as we are told in Ephesians 3:14-15, yet He is the only One who has the supreme place of the Son of the Father — the supreme Object

of His love. That is who He is: a little later in the Epistle we shall see what He became.

The Apostle had much joy because he had found some of the children of the elect lady walking in truth. They were not merely confessing the truth and holding it, but they were walking in it — that is, their ways and activities were governed by it. The Father Himself has commanded this: His truth has reached us in order that we may be controlled by it. Nothing less than this is pleasing to Him. And now, turning to the elect lady herself, the Apostle beseeches her to proceed on just those lines; having in view the instruction he is about to give her as to those who propagate not truth but error.

First of all however, in verse 5, he enforces the great commandment that we love one another — the commandment with which we are already very familiar, as having read the first Epistle. He repeats here that this is not a new commandment, something only now issued. It is the commandment which we have had from the beginning, from the very first moment that the true light began to shine in Christ. The love of God was manifested in Christ, and it demanded and produced love in those who were the recipients of it.

But then love manifests itself practically in obedience to the will of God. There may be love on the lips without obedience in the life; but love in the heart must produce obedience in the life. And in particular the commandment of love is that we should walk, and continue to walk, in all that which from the outset has been made known to us in Christ. The danger now threatening was that under various specious pretexts some should be moved away to follow and obey ideas which were foreign to that which had been from the beginning.

In verse 7 John speaks very plainly. Many had "entered" or "gone out" into the world who were nothing but deceivers. He does not say you notice, "gone out into the church," but "into the world." He alludes apparently to the same kind of people as those that he warned us against in chapter 2 of his first Epistle. Those, he said, "went out from us," giving up all pretence of being connected with the church. They turned their backs, it appears, upon the church of God, and they went forth into the world as missionaries of greater "light" than any which the church had possessed. Influenced by the powers of darkness they became heralds of notions which were a skilful blend of

heathen philosophies and Christian terms. They still talked about Christ, but their "Christ" was not the Christ of God.

All through the nineteen centuries notions of this deadly kind have been advanced, but the earliest form of them was that which is alluded to here — the denial of Jesus Christ come in flesh. This particular point is mentioned also in the opening of chapter 4 of the first Epistle. When considering that passage we saw that the denial covers both His Deity and His Manhood; for the fact that He came "in flesh" shows that He was indeed a Man, and the fact that He existed so as to "come" in that way shows that He was more than Man, even God. The non-confession of the truth as to Christ stamped these propagandists as deceivers and antichrists.

Verse 8 contains a salutary word for all who labour in the word and doctrine. If saints to whom they minister are turned aside from the truth they cannot expect a full reward in the coming day. Their reward is bound up with the faithfulness and prosperity of the saints. In this note of warning sounded by John there is something which reminds us of the notable words uttered by Paul, as recorded in Acts 20:31.

Verse 8, however, is parenthetical, and verse 9 picks up the thread from verse 7. These anti-christian deceivers were not abiding in the doctrine of Christ. They were transgressing or going forward, as they thought, to newer and better things. We have this kind of thing quite full-blown today in what is known as "Modernism." The Modernist believes that religion or theology is a human science, and that like all sciences it must not stand still but advance with the times and with the increase of all human knowledge. Hence he goes forward with much confidence to what he conceives to be greater light. No doctrine is sacred to the out-and-out Modernist. There is hardly one doctrine of the Scripture which he leaves intact.

And there are forms of modernism which would hardly be classified as "Modernist" in the religious world. They are not the less mischievous on that account. They may as yet only "transgress" or "go forward" in certain particulars. But it is the whole idea of "going forward" that is wrong. If there may be development as to some details of the faith, why not as to all?

There should indeed be growth in our apprehension of the truth. That is another thing entirely, and it is quite clearly stated and enforced in 1 John 2. The babe should become the young

man, and the young man in due time become the father. That as increasing apprehension of that which has been made known from the beginning. The faith of Christ is divine. It has come from God, and consequently cannot be improved upon or developed. Let us lay hold upon that fact very firmly.

It is possible of course to hold that the truth has come from God, and yet not to abide in the doctrine of Christ, because simple faith becomes swamped in intellectualism and reasoning. This danger specially threatens those who think more of talking of truth than walking in truth. It may in effect lead to just the same departure from the doctrine of Christ.

Now such departure means that the transgressor has not God. He has neither the Father nor the Son, for it is impossible to have One without the Other. He who abides in the doctrine — that is, in the truth — has Both.

In order that there may be obedience to the commandment, "That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it," (ver. 6), there must be a clear-cut refusal of all that denies or does not confess the truth as to Christ; and verse 10 makes this very plain. The refusal of evil and error is not inconsistent

with love of a Divine sort, it is rather an expression of it. Even amongst men if the parent has genuine love for the child that love will be as much expressed in the refusal of all that would imperil it as in feeding it with all that is good.

So even this lady and her children were to have nothing to do with the man who came to the house not bringing the true doctrine of Christ. They were not to give him entrance into the house, not even to bid him God speed. They were to meet him with the completest possible refusal. It is very striking that action such as this should be incumbent upon a lady and her children. Such as these would ordinarily be esteemed as having less responsibility in such matters than any other saints. The inference then is obvious: it is a responsibility then which rests upon all of us as individuals, and which we cannot shelve with impunity.

We are not asked to judge as to his spiritual state, we have only to judge as to the doctrine he brings. The point is not as to whether or not he is well instructed as to details, dispensational, prophetic, and the like. It is just this: does he, or does he not, bring the doctrine of Christ. A Christian woman or her

children are assumed to be capable of discerning this, and acting rightly.

Notice too that the man who comes is a propagandist, a traveling preacher. He comes to your door as the herald of something better than that which you have known. The case contemplated is not that of a believer of weak understanding, who gets entangled in what is false as to Christ. All too often in these days, when a multiplicity of errors are propagated, true saints get confused and waver and fall under the influence of what is false. Such should be treated differently, as indicated in Galatians 6:1, Jude 22, 23, and elsewhere.

When the man who preaches a false Christ comes to your door the refusal of him and his doctrine cannot be too complete. Even to bid him God speed is to partake of his evil. We are not to lend ourselves to the smallest or slightest association with such a thing.

This should teach us how exceedingly precious and valuable a thing is the doctrine of Christ! It is the corner stone of our most holy faith, and if that be shaken all will collapse in ruin. It must be guarded at all cost.

Verse 12 also indicates this. There were many other things that the Apostle had to say to the elect lady and her children — things, no doubt, of spiritual importance. He looked forward a little and saw a time not far distant when he would be able to convey these things by word of mouth — a much more joyful method. This matter about which he wrote however brooked no delay. Paper and ink might be a poorer medium, but it was an urgent matter to put them on their guard in defence of the truth.

Lastly notice that though John does not mention his name he speaks of himself as "the elder." The Epistle furnishes us with an example of the kind of service which was rendered by the elders, or presbyters, of Biblical days. They exercised an oversight of a spiritual sort. They gave guidance, in the way of practical directions, to those who were less instructed in the ways of the Lord. They shepherded the flock of God.

The Apostle John by this brief yet inspired letter was shepherding the souls of the elect lady and her children, and guarding them from the threatened ravages of some of Satan's wolves.

