



Reflections on the letter of

*2 John*

# A LOVE LETTER?

Not so much a love letter as a letter of love.

**H**ave you ever written a love letter? Have you ever received a lover letter? I guess it depends on what you mean a love letter, doesn't it? Apparently 'love Gary' written on a birthday card doesn't qualify in Julie's mind, but I'm not convinced.

I ask this because some people have referred to the smaller epistles of John as 'love letters', but I'm not convinced. To me they are more like letters of love. A subtle but important difference. Because they are not so much merely an expression of his feelings but are an expression of what love is. Even though the letter might share some similarities with a trashy romance novel - an expression of perfect love, of deception and controversy, of broken relationships and a promise to be together once again - this letter is more about how Christians live in love, which in the end cannot be done without standing firm in the truth.

The little letters of 2 & 3 John don't raise anything new that isn't explored in greater detail in 1 John, but the beauty of this is that they get straight to the point with just a few words.

# VERSES 1-3

How many times can you mention 'truth' in a greeting?

The Elder:

To the elect lady and her children: I love all of you in the truth—and not only I, but also all who have come to know the truth—  
<sup>2</sup> because of the truth that remains in us and will be with us forever.

<sup>3</sup> 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.

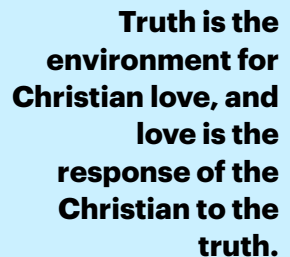
**A**t least in John's little letters he starts like a normal letter with who it is from and who it is addressed to! It is from 'The Presbyter' (or 'the Elder' as most people translate it); someone who the recipients would most likely have a friendly relationship with and who they would consider as one in an authoritative role. It is to 'the elect lady and her children'; most likely a way of referring to a Christian community.

If this is the case then it is interesting that the letter opens and closes with references to Christian communities. This is important to keep in mind as we look more deeply at what it is that is to characterise such Christian communities (or churches).

Feel free to do your own research into the author of this letter but I am taking this as written by the Apostle John. John begins this little letter with a great affirmation of love. But not a love that is blind. The truth is central to this love.

As we look further in this letter we will see that there is a reason why his love is not a blind love but is necessitated by truth. But by combining his love with 'all those who have come to know the truth' he is emphasising that there is a bigger community of love with all those who believe and trust in the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus, who himself 'remains' or 'abides' in believers and unites them not only with Himself and the Father by the Spirit but also with all who dwell in Him.

There is indeed a community of love that exists among all who know and remain in the truth of Jesus. Truth is the environment for Christian love, and love is the response of the Christian to the truth. Unity is not grown by downplaying truth and truth should always produce love.



**Truth is the environment for Christian love, and love is the response of the Christian to the truth.**

👤 *What might this greeting in verses 1 & 2 suggest is important for us to remember as we think and plan about our own 'church' (or local Christian community)?*

Verse 3 is a statement of what has formed the loving Christian community:

From GOD the FATHER  
And from JESUS CHRIST the SON




GRACE → MERCY → PEACE

It is basically an explanation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. The source is the Father and His Son Jesus Christ, who have given us freely what we do not deserve (GRACE); so that we do not receive the punishment we have earned but instead receive MERCY; which brings us PEACE with God through his Son, Jesus the Christ.

This is not only the **truth** of God's great **love** for us but also why our response to the truth is love - reflecting the love of the Father in the community formed by his truth.

The main problem in the Christian community that John is writing to is the influence of false teachers and how they ought to respond to them. An implication of the reason he is emphasising the inter-connectedness of truth and love from the very outset of his letter might well be that these false teachers are not only anti-truth by virtue of being anti-christ, but this means that they are also anti-love. Not only God's love for us but also our love for one another (and probably destroying this Christian community's love for their elder).

And so, **this greeting establishes the main focus of the letter: that truth and love are so connected that you can't have one without the other.**

 *In what other ways have you seen this inter-connectedness of truth and love in our own Christian community?*

# VERSES 4-6

Not a new commandment, but one that gives us great joy!

<sup>4</sup> I was very glad to find some of your children walking in the truth, in keeping with a command we have received from the Father.

<sup>5</sup> So now I urge you, dear lady—not as if I were writing you a new command, but one we have had from the beginning—that we love one another. <sup>6</sup> And this is love: that we walk according to His commands. This is the command as you have heard it from the beginning: you must walk in love.

John is presenting from the outset the answer to the problem that the family of Christians that he is writing to is facing. He is happy to know about some of the children that are walking in the truth, and is reminding them all about the one **true** command - to **love** one another. Just like in 1 John the point is that it is not a new command, it is what they have had from the beginning.

Walking in the truth = keeping this command to love.

What is 'love'? Obedience. Walking in the truth. In verse 4, hearing that some of them are doing this brings him great joy.

Which ought to prompt us to ask ourselves, 'what brings us great joy'? Any believer, but especially leaders of God's people ought to find great joy, or be 'very glad', in the faithfulness of other believers. It is right to reflect on whether this is true for us as a possible indicator of our own hearts. What causes you to rejoice is a good indicator of your heart.

With faithfulness of other believers causing joy in his heart, John then in verse 5 urges the church to love one another. Because to walk in the truth means that they will love one another. It is a 'beseeching' that has a heartfelt urgency to it. Again, we might like to reflect on our own hearts, as to whether or not we share this same deep sense of urgent imploring the people in our church to walk in truth and love. Or has that departed with years of frustration and disappointment? Is that something we have never had, or something that we might need to regain?

Verse 6 ends with a translation decision. The words are literally that the command as you have heard it from the beginning is to walk 'in it'. What is the 'it'? Most translators choose 'love'. However, it could also be the 'truth' or the 'commands'. More likely, all three: the truth = the command of Jesus = love. Truth and love are so tightly connected that again, you can't have one without the other.

And yet, do we?

Our problem today is that **we are not usually good at both truth and love at the same time.** Usually we tend to emphasise one at the expense of the other.

There's a father I know (my dad's cousin) who was treated so lovingly as a kid that he was able to do anything he wanted. His father never told him the truth – that he was turning into a spoilt brat. Luckily his bigger cousins made him aware of the fact.

But when he became a father himself, he was determined to be the opposite. And so he went to the other extreme – his son always knew the truth about himself when he was growing up, but never really experienced his father's love. It was harsh.

Of course we can look at this example and think, 'not cool'. But sometimes this is exactly how the Christian church can be. She can go to these extremes of emphasising the importance of truth, thinking that this is all you need to love, without showing grace whatsoever.


The sad fact is that it is not too difficult to find a church like this: very focussed on a correct understanding of the Bible, or an a correct way of living a Christian life, but who seem to come across as stubborn, arrogant and sometimes even cruel in how they speak the truth to others.

Sometimes, even though what they say may be absolutely correct, we are defending the truth of God without displaying love or humility. And if I honestly look in the mirror I can see that this is something that I have done.

But on the other hand, some whole churches have fallen into the trap of emphasising 'love' above truth. And I too have been a part of a church like this in the past. We can be so afraid of not being seen as being 'loving' that we don't ever correct someone's wrong understanding of what being a Christian is all about.

God as Father does command. And He commands us to walk in truth. He is not a father who lets his children do whatever comes naturally, whatever they feel like doing, without giving any boundaries or directions. And in doing so He is expressing love. But the Father is also merciful and commands us to reflect His grace and mercy.

The really hard thing that all of us are encouraged to do is to emphasise both truth and love in talking with people who deny the truth. It is especially hard when our whole society bombards us with messages of lies. How do we face up to that onslaught? By walking in both **truth and love** at the same time. Which is in fact the only way to truly do both. Verse 6 reminds us that to love is to be obedient (which is what John quotes Jesus as saying in chapter 14 of his Gospel).

 *In what ways do we struggle with walking in both truth and love in our own Christian community?*

How do we act in love? Not only in verse 6, but right throughout the Bible, God has revealed to us in His word that love is only present when it is expressed in obedience. If we look to our heavenly Father to understand love, we are shown Jesus. And looking to Jesus for perfect love we find perfect obedience, obedience to His Father's will that led him to die on the cross to pay for our sins. To know the truth of Jesus is to know how love is expressed.

**To know the truth is about knowing Jesus; which is to know how love is expressed in obedience.**

The other implication of this is that if we want to love God and others we need to know what God requires of us.

As much as the whole 'love languages' theory is deeply flawed (a discussion for a later time), it is helpful in helping us understand something: if I want to know how to express my love for my spouse in a way that they

know that they are loved, I need to know how to do it. If flowers and gifts are not what they require to feel loved, then in that sense it is a pointless activity.

The point is that if we want to love God, which is to walk in obedience, then it is impossible to do that if we don't know what commands to obey. Another way that truth and love are inter-connected. **We can only show our love for God if we know the truth of his commands.**

🕯 *What then do we need to continue to intentionally plan for in our church community? What opportunities do we need to remember to be giving our church family?*

# VERSES 7-9

What's your problem?

<sup>7</sup> Many deceivers have gone out into the world; they do not confess the coming of Jesus Christ in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist. <sup>8</sup> Watch yourselves so you don't lose what we have worked for, but that you may receive a full reward. <sup>9</sup> Anyone who does not remain in Christ's teaching but goes beyond it, does not have God. The one who remains in that teaching, this one has both the Father and the Son.

The second half of John's letter now turns its attention to the specific problem that the recipients of the letter were facing. In all translations there is a small word at the beginning of verse 7 that has been understood to not be a conjunction, but to me it could well be. Verse 7 could well begin with the word 'because'. Which to me makes sense. John is explaining here why he is going on about truth and love. The reason truth, love (obedience to Jesus' commands) are important to remember is because of what they are currently facing.

There were people amongst them, probably travelling teachers and prophets, who were teaching that Jesus was not a true human being, that he did not “come in the flesh”. John stresses the significance of this by going so far as to call them antichrists. But even more, that these people in reality are doing the work of THE deceiver, THE Antichrist.

These people are likely the same ones who appeared in John’s first letter, and we see there, and here, that we must draw the ‘line in the sand’ between truth and error at who people say that Jesus is. It appears that there were some people who were trying to teach that Jesus was somehow not truly human, maybe that he was God only pretending to be human for a while, or maybe that he was merely human and not the Son of God.

As we know, the fact that Jesus was a man is not just significant for the history books, but it is a necessary basis for the Christian gospel. If he was not a man, then we cannot be saved, we are still going to bear the punishment for our sins. Not only that, but if Jesus is not the first human to be resurrected and seated in heaven then we have no hope for resurrection. In this we have the essence of the good news of the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ: that in being human, and dying and being raised to life, Jesus has defeated death for all humanity.

Whilst the aspect of false teaching, or deception, that is mentioned is the reality of the Jesus Christ coming in the flesh (his humanity), it can’t be separated from the purpose

of the incarnation, that is, to give himself as the atoning sacrifice for our sins (see 1 John 1:7, 2:2, 3:5, 4:2-3, 10).

Verse 8 expresses why this truth is important. Whilst some translations (NIV) choose to say the danger is losing what 'you' have worked for, others render it is what 'we' have worked for. Either way, the 'work' would be receiving and preaching faith and repentance, leading to the 'reward' of eternal life (see John 6:27-29). Either by the local church or by the the Elder and his team. Don't be confused - this is not preaching a salvation by works, but more of a 'losing' all that has been accomplished in the growth of the Christian community by the teaching of the truth about Jesus. Not getting a full reward would seem to be losing some people to the Deceiver.

Verse 9 really shows us that nothing changes, that there is nothing new under the sun despite the arrogance of the intellectuals of every age. Why are we so proud of our knowledge that we feel the need to 'run ahead of' or 'go beyond' the historical teaching of Jesus? Perhaps pride? Perhaps because the heart of sin is placing ourselves in the role that only belongs to God?

All this proves is that those who leave behind the orthodox teaching of Jesus Christ do not have God. The reality is that when we think we have moved beyond the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ that was from the beginning, then we leave behind the Father and the Son. And are left with nothing but what we deserve.

The thing is, that when we fail to embrace new teaching, or when we are vocal in our rejection of new teaching, people want to ask us, 'what's **your** problem?' Focussing not on the problem itself but on the fact that WE are being so horribly 'conservative' rather than the virtuous 'progressive'. It is like WE are now the bad guys. And so we might be tempted to entertain new ideas, or be *tolerant* of new ideas that leave behind the teaching of Jesus. Gracious in our standing firm? Absolutely. But acceptance of the message? No.

**It is RIGHT not to 'go beyond' the teaching of Jesus. We OUGHT to be known as a Christian community that holds to the teaching of Jesus.**

🗣️ *How should we respond when we are the 'bad guys' by not embracing teaching that leaves behind the truth of what Jesus taught?*

# VERSES 10-11

Guilty by association?

<sup>10</sup> If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your home, and don't say, "Welcome," to him; <sup>11</sup> for the one who says, "Welcome," to him shares in his evil works.

So what does John want this Christian family to do in the face of the teachers of these lies? Not to 'welcome' them; which is 'sharing' their **evil work**. These are pretty strong words. Welcome these teachers and you act as if you are welcoming their message.

Some people in the past have used these verses to close the doors to their church, to become a type of closed holy club so that they will not fall into the trap of sharing in the wicked work of the world. That's not what this is about. This is about not welcoming people who claim to be Christian teachers but are in fact not teaching the truth about Jesus. John is writing to this church family in a situation where there is a lot of pressure from people claiming to be teaching in the name of Christ, to water down the claims of Jesus, to exchange the truth of God for a lie. Sound

familiar? If not, then hang out more with Anglicans that do not share our Reformed Evangelical convictions!

But even in our local Christian community we will also experience a pressure to dilute the message of Christ that is not that different from the pressure felt by the people that John is writing to. They felt the pressure, as we do, of their world wanting them to reduce the person of Jesus Christ into someone less than he was and is. He is BOTH **Saviour** and **Lord**. He doesn't just display God's **love** by saving us but also call us to listen to the **truth** and follow his commands. John calls in this letter for the Christian family to stand firm in the face of this pressure to leave behind who Jesus truly is, and God would have us do the same.

**They felt the pressure, as we do, of their world wanting them to reduce the person of Jesus Christ into someone less than he was and is.**

**The call here is to limit the influence of the false teachers.**

In their context, to not welcome them - maybe into their homes, maybe into their church gatherings, maybe into their pulpits. Or maybe all of the above. In their context, hospitality was more than being a generous person to someone in need, it may well have been to vouch for the person, to indicate that they were worthy individuals to be respected and listened to. The provision of hospitality for itinerant teachers/preachers/prophets seemed to be very important in the early church.

So it may well be that in their case, to 'welcome' or offer hospitality was to formally partner with their work. Which we have already seen is the work of the Antichrist. It turns people away from Jesus as the Christ and towards eternal destruction. As someone once said to me in Chile, there was a stage when pastors were doing nothing more than holding the hands of their people as they walked towards hell. May this not be the case for us! Love = Truth.

🗣️ *Should we be doing more than removing certain pages from the Southern Cross to limit the damage to our Christian family from false teachers? Or are we going ok in this area?*

# VERSES 12-13

Zoom or YouTube are never enough.

<sup>12</sup> Though I have many things to write to you, I don't want to do so with paper and ink. Instead, I hope to be with you and talk face to face so that our joy may be complete.

<sup>13</sup> The children of your elect sister send you greetings.

The closing of the letter shows that the strong, truthful words come from one who loves them. Along with greetings from his local church community to theirs.

Although he is communicating with them using the most up to date technology of the day (paper and ink), it is not enough. His desire is to be present with them to talk face to face (funnily enough it is literally 'mouth to mouth') is for the purpose of making their joy 'complete' (he and his companions or both his and the people he is writing to?). There is something that is missing when we communicate without being physically present, which is a truth that the current church has realised in the mess of COVID restrictive life.

And yet, it is probably more than just an intimacy of being present with people in mind here. It could well be that being with them in person will be more effective in encouraging them to walk in the truth. By speaking with them face to face he will more easily be able to respond to their situation (in truth and love), so that he might see ALL of them might walk in the truth. In that sense, a completion of his (and their) joy.

👤 *Two separate (and yet linked) questions to ponder:*

*Are we doing enough to encourage our church family to meet face to face?*

*Are we making full use of the technology at our disposal to communicate with our church family (and our mission partners) to encourage and help them to walk in truth and love?*

Having looked at this letter more closely, we can see that it's not a regular love letter. Not that I have much experience with what you would consider a regular love letter. John's second letter is not so much a love letter, but a letter of love. And what he points out is that we know what love is when we know the truth – that by God's grace and mercy Jesus died so that sinners could be forgiven and have peace.

Let us serve our Christian family by walking in both truth and love as God commands us to and putting into practice those things that will both protect and edify them.

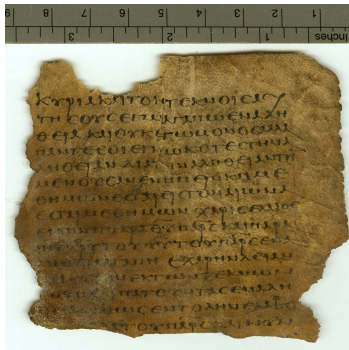


# PRAYERS

Perhaps our prayers might be guided by a few of the things we have reflected upon in John's second little letter:

- ▶ Give thanks for God's grace and mercy that bring us peace with the Father through the Son.
- ▶ For the help of the Holy Spirit to show that same grace, mercy and love in our lives and relationships.
- ▶ That we might display our thanks and love for God in obedience to his will.
- ▶ That God would help us to love one another.
- ▶ That God would give us the strength to stand up for the truth, especially the truth about his incarnate Son Jesus, the Christ.
- ▶ But to do both of these things at the same time! To stand up for the truth of God in a way that expresses his love and mercy and grace so that the name of Jesus may be glorified.
- ▶ For people in our lives with whom we need to share the truth, or express our love, or proclaim the truth about Jesus in love.

The assumption of these reflections are that 1, 2 & 3 John are all written by the Apostle John who also wrote the Gospel of John and Revelation. See pages 670-675 of Carson & Moo's *Introduction to the New Testament* (2nd ed.) for an investigation into the authorship question



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Prepared by Gary B. Haddon for staff planning retreat August 2023.