

An Exercise in Biblical Study

My rule for understanding scripture is always to read the passage first, over and over again, before ever opening a commentary. I know for a certainty God's word is inspired but even the wisest and most respected theologians can insert their personal opinions into the interpretation of scripture.

As I prepare to teach my own Bible studies, there have been occasions when I have not even ventured outside of the Word of God in the preparation of the study. It is not that I don't think commentators have something of value to say. It is simply that scripture itself usually gives the meaning of a passage - or that the theme I am studying has a thread running from Genesis to Revelation. I love to connect the dots and discover those threads.

Recently I felt the need to use my husband's large theological library in order to help me understand two small books - 2 and 3 John. After multiple readings of these two letters I still had questions.

These are the smallest books of the New Testament. One commentator even suggested that they had a hard time making it into being included in the final version of scripture. Curiously, one of the full commentary sets (covering Genesis to Revelation) on my husband's shelf doesn't even bother to mention them.

However, since these books are included in my copy of scripture, I believe that God had a reason for doing so. Since *all Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work* (2 Timothy 3:16-17), I believe that there is no part of His word that should be skipped over. Every word deserves contemplation.

I suggest you read both these books. They are very short. The comments made by theologians won't make much sense unless you read through these letters first.

Practically every commentator admitted their interpretations were a guess. Comments such as "may be", "conjecture is fruitless", and "no one can be sure" were interspersed throughout their writings. I thought it interesting, however, that some of them were very adamant that their interpretation had to be correct even while admitting that others (even quoting the commentator) had a different and sometimes opposite opinion.

The greeting in both letters is from "the Elder." There was agreement that the Elder was the aged apostle John, probably the last surviving apostle. The word elder was often interpreted as Presbyter, a word understood to mean a wise leader in the body of Christ.

Some theologians saw no connection between the two letters while others insisted that the two were incontrovertibly tied together.

Some believe that 2 John was a letter to a particular church (the elect lady and her children) instructing the leadership to watch very carefully for false doctrine. They believe that John sent this letter to the church where Gaius and Diotrephes were members. 2 John does not mention any one by name. *The elect lady and her children* in verse 1 of 2 John and *the children of your elect sister* in verse 13 of 2 John could refer to the church to which John was addressing 2 John and the church

where he resided (many believe he was in Ephesus). The commentators say if that is true, then John's statement, "*I wrote to the church*" (3 John 9) refers to 2 John. That seems reasonable to me. Even today, we refer to "sister churches."

Others emphatically state that 2 John must have been addressed to a Christian woman of high character, a special friend of the apostle John, saying there is no connection between the two letters.

John does mention three names in 3 John: Gaius to whom the letter was addressed, Diotrephes whose desire for power and control was causing great discord in the church and Demetrius who had an impeccable reputation among all. Some commentators believe that Demetrius was the one who carried the letters at the same time to both the church (2 John) and to Gaius (3 John). Both these letters end with a similar statement. John had many things he wanted to communicate, but made his letters short because he fully intended to come and speak face to face with the church and with Gaius. Whether he actually made that trip is unknown.

In 2 John, John rejoices that *some of your children* are *walking in truth*. If this is indeed addressed to a church, the commentators suggest that *some* was used because some of the members were not walking in the truth - mainly Diotrephes and his followers.

Understanding that there is a possibility that these two letters are not related, it seems likely that they were. The truth that John was trying to convey was the same truth he made abundantly clear in the gospel of John, 1 John and Revelation. The truth is Jesus Christ. Without trusting in His Truth, there is no love, there is no salvation and there is no reward. His greeting in 2 John emphasizes *God the Father and ... the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father, in truth and love* (verse 3).

The church should not let anything or anyone stand in the way of the truth of that doctrine. That truth can be known and known intimately. 1 John mentions "know, knows, known" 38 times - *These things are written so that you may know you have eternal life* (1 John 5:13).

Jesus is the head of the church. There is no other preeminent one in His body. That was the great evil of Diotrephes - he wanted to be in control, the boss of the church, and he took down others with him. One commentator even mentioned an article that had been published about Diotrephes in a Christian magazine. The editor received 25 calls from church deacons cancelling their subscriptions because they were offended by the article!

The fact that commentators could not say for certainty who John was writing to or even if Gaius was still a member of the church or had been excommunicated as a result of Diotrephes' efforts or whether Demetrius was a member of Gaius' church or the bearer of the letters does not bother me. These things may be debated throughout the ages or even not counted worthy of consideration.

What cannot be ignored is that God takes very seriously what we believe. John admonishes against being tolerant of false doctrine and evil in the church. At least five times in 2 John and at least six times in 3 John, the word truth is mentioned. What is clear is that we are to *love in truth* (2 John 1, 3 John 1). "*And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free*" (John 8:32). "*I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me*" (John 14:6).