

A LOOK AT A BOOK: 2 and 3 John

November 25, 2012

2 JOHN

v. 1. The writer of this letter does not give his personal name. He writes like a modern clergyman who might sign a pastoral letter to members of his congregation with “Your pastor” without adding his name. What matters is his position rather than his personal name. This is indicated by the phrase “the elder.” The word simply means an old man, and hence a (usually old) person exercising oversight and leadership. Elsewhere in the New Testament it refers to groups of leaders in local churches. This meaning is unlikely here since the writer refers to himself in the singular as “the elder,” and since he is probably writing to a church of which he was not a member. He addresses his readers as “the chosen lady and her children.” This is a metaphorical way of saying “the church and its members.” The word translated “lady” is a respectful term. It is the feminine form of the word “lord”; possibly there is a hint of the church being the bride of the Lord, so that her children are the spiritual offspring of the Lord and his church. She is “chosen,” an adjective often applied to Christians to denote that it was God who called them to be his people; the word always signifies those who have responded to this call and thus actually become the people of God.

v. 3. “Grace and peace” figure in the typical Pauline greeting, but the elder includes “mercy.” “Grace” signifies the love and favor shown freely to men by God, and “mercy” has very much the same meaning; “peace” represents the sum total of the spiritual blessings given to men by God in his grace and mercy. God is given the title which had taken on a new significance for Christians in the light of the revelation of Jesus as his son; “father” was a word already used in the Old Testament and in Judaism to describe God, but only in Christianity was the thought of God’s personal, loving relationship to the individual developed. To say “no” to God’s way of revealing himself is to say “no” to God himself, for he will not let himself be known by men except on his own terms.

v. 4. Ancient letters, like their modern counterparts, often began with an expression of joy on the part of the writer for good news concerning his readers. The phrase “some” may carry the implication that other members of the church were not living as they should; in this case the following injunctions would be

addressed particularly to these members of the church. But while it is quite possible that some members of the church were not living as they should, it is more likely that the elder is thinking of the personal contact which he has had with some members of the church. Presumably they had visited him, and were now returning home with this letter of greeting. To live “by the truth” means to live in accordance with God’s revelation in the gospel and by the standards contained in it. It is the same as living “in the light” (I John 1:7).

v. 5. The elder now issues the first of two exhortations to the church as a whole; the address, “dear lady,” shows that he is addressing all the members and exhorting them to live in the same way as the members with whom he has had personal contact. It is not surprising that the elder has no new teaching or command to give the church. It is true that Jesus once spoke of his command as a new one (John 13:34) and that the elder himself could also describe it as still new because it expressed the way of life of the new era initiated by the coming of Jesus (I John 2:8), but the years had gone past, and the readers would already have been familiar with a command that was well known in the church. It has often been objected that we cannot be commanded to show an emotion such as love. The objection is met by observing that Christian love is a matter of active caring for others rather than an emotional feeling, but it is difficult not to care for other people and to be conscious for their needs without feelings of sympathy, compassion, and affection developing spontaneously.

v. 6. Since the word “love” can have a variety of senses and loving has a number of aspects, the elder draws attention to one particular feature which he felt needed emphasis. Love means living according to the Father’s commands. We can readily understand that love for the Father would involve keeping his commands: the person who loves somebody else will be anxious to please him by doing what he wants. But the elder says that love for one another involves keeping the Father’s commands. A further difficulty is that the elder oscillates between “the command” and “the commands.” These two difficulties are solved when we grasp that “the command” is that we should love one another, while “the commands” are the detailed requirements which unfold the structure of this central command. In Romans 13:8-10 Paul asserts that the various social commands in the second part of the Ten Commandments are summed up in the one rule of loving one’s neighbor, so that love is the fulfillment of the law.

v. 7. In the Greek text, the verse begins with a “because” which indicates that it gives the reason for what has preceded. Jesus had prophesied the appearance of false prophets who would attempt to deceive God’s people (Mark 13:5f., 22), and now his prophecy had come true. When traveling preachers came around, it may

have been difficult for a small church group to know whether they shared the same understanding of the faith, although orthodox and unorthodox leaders alike probably did their best to indicate which groups were acceptable from their own point of view. Here the elder proposes a clear test by which the church to which he is writing may test the orthodoxy of any suspect preachers, and at the same time warns the church that such people may well visit them. We know that some Gnostic thinkers taught that a heavenly power (the Christ) came upon Jesus at his baptism in the form of the Spirit, but that it departed from him again before the crucifixion, so that there was no lasting union of the divine Christ with the human Jesus, and hence no real, lasting incarnation. The elder's formulation of the orthodox faith in Jesus Christ seems to be designed to exclude such interpretations of the person of Jesus. The word had become flesh and remained flesh. It is a point which receives much stress in I John (2:18-27; 4:1-6; 5:5-8). Certainly the elder is so convinced of the danger of taking up this position that he brands any person who adopts it as (the) deceiver and (the) antichrist. The word "antichrist" is found only here and in I John 2:18, 22; 4:3.

v. 8. The elder is expressing his fear that his missionary and pastoral work will have been a failure since his readers have turned aside from the truth which he and his colleagues committed to them. The Christian life leads in the end to a reward, and failure to persevere in the truth (and in right conduct) can lead to loss of what God has promised to his people.

v. 10-11. Those who accept "the teaching" should not give any kind of practical encouragement to the false teachers. The adoption of these measures would obviously curb the influence of the false teachers. It is clear, however, that the elder is more concerned with the danger of members of the church aligning themselves with them. To welcome them was to express solidarity with them; even if one professed to reject their views, hospitality was a way of sharing in their work, and those who helped them in this way were in danger of coming under the same condemnation as the false teachers themselves. The church must be kept from contamination by error.

3 JOHN

Address and Greeting, 3 John 1-4

This is one of the few letters in the New Testament addressed to an individual Christian. His name was Gaius, which was as common then as John or James today. We know nothing about him beyond what can be gleaned from the letter. He was a member of one of the churches over which the writer of the letter

exercised some oversight, but there is no indication whether or not he held any particular office in it. There are no positive reasons for identifying him with any of the other bearers of the same name in the New Testament. The writer refers to himself simply as “the elder.” He thus writes in token of the position of authority and respect which he holds in the church, so that this is not a private letter but rather has the force of an official communication. Presumably the writer was not known to his friend by his personal name, perhaps because of his greater age and the respect which went with it. But although there is this sense of distance between the two men, there is certainly no lack of warmth in the tone of his greeting. He speaks of Gaius with affection as his friend, literally his “beloved,” and strengthens what could have degenerated into a conventional expression by commenting that he loves him in truth. It is surprising that the letter does not contain a specific word of greeting at this point, as is universally the case in other letters in the New Testament (see especially 2 John 3).

V 2. Whatever be the reason for the omission in greeting, the elder follows conventional practice in expressing good wishes to his friend. In Christian letters this element often took the form of a prayer of Thanksgiving to God, sometimes at considerable length. There is some probability that Gaius was not in the best of health. At the same time the elder wants him to prosper in every way. This verb literally means “to have a good journey.”

V 3. The elder now gives the reason for his confidence in Gaius’s spiritual progress. He has had news of him from some visitors who were able to testify to the quality of his life. They bore testimony to Gaius’s truth, i.e. to the concrete evidence of his adherence to the truth. Soundness in doctrine is no doubt included in the thought, but the basic point is that Gaius’s life of loving hospitality for other Christians (vv. 5-6) indicated his adherence to the truth.

The Writer Praises Gaius, 3 John 5-8

Having spoken in general terms of Gaius’s commendable way of life, the elder now refers to one particular aspect of it which is important in view of the main theme of the letter. The evangelistic and teaching ministry of the church was dependent on the work of traveling missionaries who served the various churches and who were dependent on the hospitality and the gifts which they received from the members of the churches which they visited. Gaius had been conspicuous for his hospitality to such travelers on their various visits to his area, and this was no doubt part of the news which had been brought back to the elder by “the brothers” (v. 3). The elder describes his action as “faithful.” In the ancient world it was difficult for travelers to find decent accommodation except with their friends. It was a signal feature of Gaius’s hospitality that he was prepared to extend it to

people who were otherwise unknown to him and had no claims on him except that they formed part of the company of those who like him had come to know the truth (cf. 2 John 1).

V 6. While Christian missionaries needed to beware of the temptation to make a good thing out of their work, and churches had to be ware of being taken in by charlatans, it was perhaps more important to remind the churches not to treat the missionaries like beggars and so bring discredit on the name of the God to whom they were looking for their support.

V 7. The elder's appeal to Gaius rests on this fact that missionaries are wholly dependent on God's people for their support. In not claiming support from the people whom they evangelized they were motivated by Jesus' principle: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matthew 10:8). To take payment for the gospel would be to nullify the offer of free grace.

The Writer Denounces Diotrephes (3 John 9-10)

The letter now reaches its climax, for which all that has preceded has been in some sense a preparation. The elder informs Gaius that he had written a letter to the church but that someone called Diotrephes was refusing to accept "us." This must mean that Diotrephes was refusing to accept whatever was said in the letter, and possibly also that when the letter came into his hands he did his best to suppress it. It is possible that the elder, having had his letter to the church suppressed by Diotrephes, made a second attempt to communicate with the church by writing to his friend Gaius, hoping that Gaius would share the letter with the church. As for Diotrephes, he appears only here in the New Testament and has gone down in history as the man who wanted to lead the church. He appears to have resented the elder and his influence over the church. He felt thwarted by the influence of the elder. Perhaps he thought that he had justifiable grounds for impatience. The old man may have been standing in the way of younger men; he may have held on to his position instead of in effect resigning in favor of younger men; he may have seemed conservative and even reactionary in his ways when the times were demanding new and vigorous measures. Diotrephes is a standing warning against the danger of confusing personal ambition with zeal for the cause of the gospel. It should be noted there is no suggestion that Diotrephes disagreed with the elder on any vital point of doctrine.

V10. Action was called for. The elder hoped to visit the area before long, and if he did so, he would not hesitate to take Diotrephes to task for what he was doing. It is not Christian to refrain from exercising legitimate authority when there is need to do so; the modern church is perhaps too chary in exercising brotherly admonition

and even discipline when it is required. Certainly the elder felt that Diotrephes merited censure – and there is no reason to doubt his verdict on the matter. Diotrephes had been “gossiping maliciously” about him, i.e. making unjustified accusations against him. He had moved from words to deeds by refusing to accept into his house any traveling missionaries who were associated with the elder and by refusing to allow other members of the church to receive them; if anybody did receive them, he put them out of the church.

The Writer Praises Demetrius (3 John 11-12)

Having spoken about the conduct of Diotrephes, the elder now urges Gaius to imitate what is good rather than what is evil. Without any warning the elder introduces the figure of Demetrius. He is doubtless meant as an example of the good which Gaius is to imitate, but the real reason for mentioning him here at the end of the main part of the letter is to write a note of commendation for him to Gaius. It can be taken as virtually certain that he was the bearer of the letter (cf. Romans 16:1f.) and as highly probable that he was a traveling missionary, possibly one of the group which had been made unwelcome by Diotrephes.

Final Words and Greetings (3 John 13-15)

The elder had already announced his intention of visiting the church (v. 10). In view of this anticipated visit he feels that he is released from the obligation which would otherwise have rested upon him to say considerably more in his letter. Perhaps the elder hoped that, although Diotrephes had suppressed his letter to the church, Gaius would share this letter with the church when opportunity permitted, and therefore it includes greetings to all who lived according to the truth and thus were in the fullest sense “friends” of the writer.