

2 2 John. Keeping an Inclusive Community Viable: the Limits of Tolerance

Outline

Greetings to the Elect Lady and her children, vv. 1-3

The bond of inclusive love that unites, 4-6

The limits of tolerance: antichrists, 7-11

Greetings from the Elect Sister and her children, 12-13

1. Women and Sexual Minorities. 3 John is the only New Testament book addressed to a “woman.” While 3 John names three unmarried males and speaks of the church as a community of “friends / beloveds,” 2 John prefers the image of a lady with her children (vv. 1, 4-5, 13), perhaps because the author addresses a house church (v. 10) led by a woman, such as Lydia (Acts 16:13-15) or Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5), or the Apostle Junia (Romans 16:7). Both 2 and 3 John thus subvert the patriarchal model of a family headed by a male. The contrast with an all-male hierarchy in the later institutionalized church is impressive. Nevertheless, 2 John’s exhortation not to allow imposters to enter and teach in the house church may reflect the notion already evident in the pastoral letters that women were more easily led astray (1 Timothy 2:14; 2 Timothy 3:6-7).

2. The Way: (a) Truth and (b) Love: A fundamental dialectic for the weak and poor. In both 2 and 3 John the same juxtaposition of truth and love is fundamental, but in 2 John the emphasis falls

more on truth (five times in vv. 1-4 plus “teaching” three times in vv. 9-10) rather than on love (vv. 1, 3, 5-6 plus grace and mercy, v. 3). John the elder addresses the ecclesiastical community under the figure of an “elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I, but also all who know the truth, because of the truth that abides in us and will be with us forever...truth and love” (vv. 1-3). Truth is also expressed in reference to the “teaching” (vv. 9-10) of the incarnation (“flesh,” v.7; cf. 1 John 2:18-19; 4:1-2), affirming the complete humanity of Jesus, and demonstrating his basic solidarity with the weak (cf. 1 John 1:1-4; 3:17).

While 1 John juxtaposes light and love, 2 John juxtaposes truth and love, and 3 John reverses the emphasis to juxtapose love and truth. All three letters describe the recipients not just as believing the truth, but primarily as walking in the truth:

“I was overjoyed when some of the friends (Greek: “brothers”) arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth...Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius [the bearer of the letter?], and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true” (3 John 3-4, 12).

The Bible never speaks of “ethics” or “morals”, which are categories of the Greek elitist philosophies. Instead, the Bible describes the Christian life as a “walk”: “If we say that we have koinonia (solidarity/fellowship) with God yet walk in the darkness, we lie by word and deed. But if we walk in the light, as God is in the light, then we have koinonia with one another, and the blood of Jesus, God’s Son, cleanses us from all oppression” (1 John 1:6-8; v. 8 ‘adikía, injustice, oppression). In 2 John 4-6 the elder refers to members of the community who “walk” (vv. 4, 6) in the truth, fulfilling the

divine commandment(s) to “walk” in mutual love, which involved solidarity with the many weak and poor members of the community (1 John 3:16-18).¹

3. Safe Space for the Elect Lady and her Children. The inclusive, welcoming solidarity of love has its norms and limitations (vv. 7-11). When those who pretend to be progressives “progress” right off the road of truth and of mutual love, John says we should neither follow nor receive them. We can never make common cause with the oppressors in their oppression of the weak, nor with the violent in their violence against the poor. Certain conflictive contexts demand a choice in favor of the oppressed and against the injustice and lies of the oppressors (the “option for the poor”).

This intimate link between love and truth which the Bible teaches is not much appreciated today. But only in that way can we maintain viable communities and safe places in an often hostile and violent world. Consequently, in Romans Paul similarly sought to strengthen tolerant and hospitable communities (15:8-13), but at the same time he recognized that tolerance and hospitality have their limits (16:17-20; cf. 2 Corinthians 6:14--7:1 with its context; Titus 3:10-11; Revelation 2:2; Matthew 18). Undoubtedly many would prescribe particular norms and standards differently than John, but in our modern world, characterized by terrorism and violence, with even children shooting their classmates in small towns, we can appreciate the importance of the elder’s concern for safe space.

4. Judaism and Anti-Semitism? 3 and 2 John appear to present a marked contrast regarding the relation of the Johannine communities to Judaism.

3 John is the only New Testament book that does not refer explicitly to Jesus Christ and appears to contain nothing that a pious Jew might not write or accept:

- life is presented simply as “walking” in “the way,” a favorite metaphor in the Hebrew Bible;

- even more than James, 3 John is theocentric rather than Christocentric, naming God three times (vv. 6, 11), and speaking literally of “the name” (v. 7), probably intending reference to Jesus, but which a Jewish reader could easily understand as referring to the sacred name of Yahweh, the liberator of the Exodus;

- outsiders are referred to literally as “gentiles” (v. 7), which suggests a sense of Jewish identity for those inside the community;

- 3 John contains neither an opening nor closing greeting that is specifically Christian (cf. 2 John 3), but concludes with the traditional Hebrew greeting of “peace” (v. 15; shalom);

- although 3 John contains the only explicit references to “the church” in the Johannine writings (vv. 6, 9-10), the Greek term (ἐκκλησία) means literally “assembly” and may refer to any political or religious gathering;

- above all, the theology of 3 John is emphatically ecumenical, affirming that all humans who do good are of God (v. 11)--that is, the criterion that distinguishes human beings is not some creed nor certain titles attributed to Jesus, but an “orthopraxis” of solidarity with other humans in their need (similarly Jesus in Matthew 25:31-46).

By its sensitive, cautious language, 3 John thus gives the impression that the elder John and Gaius have profound Jewish roots, maintain an ecumenical spirit and seek to avoid unnecessary offense to Jewish readers.

2 John, on the other hand, reflects more the Christocentric theology and style characteristic of Paul:

- an explicitly Christian greeting opens the letter (v. 3);

- Jesus’ “new commandment” is now cited as no longer new (vv. 5-6; cf. John 13:34-35);

- Jesus' incarnation is the decisive point for determining a policy of solidarity or separation (vv. 7-11);

- Jesus Christ is named explicitly in an emphatically doctrinal context.

Nevertheless, the separation policy set forth is directed only against heretical Christians (Docetic and proto-Gnostic types) who accepted Jesus' deity but denied the full humanity of the incarnation (see under 1 John). The refusal of hospitality (2 John 10) thus is not directed against needy travelers in general nor Jews in particular, but against imposters who sought to infiltrate the house churches, proclaiming elitist teachings that damaged the welfare of the community.

3 and 2 John thus proceed from a Jewish author. Gaius (3 John) apparently was Jewish, but the "Elect Lady" (2 John) may well have represented a largely Gentile house church.

5. The Conflictive History of the Johannine Community. To better understand the great diversity between the emphatic recommendation of hospitality in 3 John and the strong prohibition of hospitality in 2 John, Raymond Brown's reconstruction of the Johannine Community history in five stages is of great help.² While this precise reconstruction is hypothetical, it provides a helpful framework for interpretation. Something like this development must be presupposed as these early disciples struggled to establish inclusive, welcoming communities that would be viable in an often hostile world:

a. Formation. Before the Gospel of John was written, the Beloved Disciple and other Jews in Palestine, followers of John the Baptist (John 1:35-40), accepted Jesus as the Davidic Messiah. They joined with other Jews who made disciples in Samaria (John 4) and who understood Jesus to be a new Moses, but preexistent (John 1:1-28).

b. Rejection. Certain Jewish leaders threw Jesus' disciples out of the synagogues (John 9:22; 16:2), with the accusation that they made Jesus a second God (5:18), contradicting Jewish monotheism. As a result, this community of the Beloved Disciple became quite hostile toward these leaders and their followers (8:44), and stressed the magnitude of the fulfillment of the promises of God now in this life (abundant eternal life, the gift of the Holy Spirit).

c. Emigration. To escape the persecution in Palestine, the community of the Beloved Disciple moved to Ephesus, where the Beloved Disciple (or a more Hellenized colleague) wrote the Gospel of John 1-20. The Gospel placed emphasis on Jesus' deity (1:1; 20:28), full humanity (1:14) and on mutual love as the only commandment (13:34; 15:12, 17; concerning love toward enemies, see under Matthew, Luke and Romans).

d. Separation. Some more prosperous members decided not to practice solidarity with the weak (koinonia; 1 John 3:3, 6-7) and share their possessions with the poor (3:16-18), so they separated themselves from the community (2:18-19). 1 and 2 John were written to combat the docetic and proto-Gnostic errors and exaggerations of this separatist elitist group.

e. Institutionalization. 3 - 2 - 1 John and John 21 (the Gospel's Appendix) were written as responses to the crisis of authority in the communities, probably in that order (the canonical order of 1-3 John, as in the case of Paul's letters, was determined by length, not chronology). In John 21 Jesus gives Peter pastoral authority, although in John 10 Jesus himself is the only true pastor (see 1 Peter 5:1, "fellow elder" and Peter in Matthew 16:13-23). Diotrephes, apparently wealthy, with a house church meeting in his ample home, is criticized in 3 John for abusing his authority as owner of the house, expelling members and refusing hospitality to the elder John's emissaries. Diotrephes' authority simply as home owner is remarkably different from that of the elders in 1 Timothy 5:17-18, lacking spacious

homes, but with salaries and authority to teach. Perhaps in Timothy's context affluent women owned the large homes and the power struggle with poorer elders provoked the male effort to reduce their influence by prohibiting their teaching and authority over males (1 Timothy 2:11-15). Diotrephes' apparent egotism may have stemmed from excessive fear of the influence of unknown itinerant teachers and prophets, whom he sought to silence by prohibiting all contact with them (2 John 7-11). With his ambition to dominate instead of serve (Mark 10:45), Diotrephes may anticipate the institution of monarchical bishops, first attested in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch (died around 135; see the "Nicolaitans" ["conquering the people"?] later in Ephesus, Revelation 2:6, 14-15; cf. Balaam ["devours the people"]). In the face of Diotrephes' fears and abuse of authority, the elder John responds only with exhortation, evidently lacking authority for more forceful action.

Bibliography: Freedom and Subversive Authority

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