

2 & 3 John

Fact Sheet

General Background:

- These two letters were probably written by the same hand, who may have also written 1 John. The language and style and vocabulary are all very similar. It isn't likely, though, that these were written by the same person who produced the Gospel according to John. More likely is that these letters were written later, around 100 CE, by folks from the same community or "school" or tradition that produced John's Gospel, building on the images begun there.

- The community that produced these "Johannine" letters was probably located somewhere near Ephesus in present-day Turkey. They probably were a Christian group that had experienced or were still undergoing a painful separation from the Jewish community and society to which it originally belonged. All this tension might explain the different "camps" that seem to be present that we hear about in the two letters.

- The main thrust of these two letters seems to deal with certain "deceivers" (2 John verse 7). The letters seem to have been written during a conflict with people who denied that the human Jesus was identical with the divine Christ. They believed that Jesus wasn't human at all, but only a spirit, who "wore" a body like a person would wear a mask. This heresy would later be known as "docetism" from the Greek for "to seem."

- Small Catechism refresher question: why is it important to our faith that Jesus really *is* fully human and fully divine? What does the second article of the Apostle's or Nicene Creed say about this?

- The curious thing about these two letters together is that, in their effort to stem the spread of the false teaching, they seem to contradict each other. Although both letters (3 John especially) insist upon the importance of loving one another, 2 John calls upon its readers to avoid these opponents of theirs and even refuse to them the hospitality usually shown to Christian travelers. More on this later.

2 John General notes:

Verse 1: "The elder" implies someone who holds a position of some authority in the community, although it is never made clear exactly who this "elder" is. We just know that we can and should trust what he has to say.

Verse 1: "The elect lady" is probably a metaphor for a Christian congregation (like the Church being referred to as Christ's bride). The elect lady's "children" are the members of that congregation. It could also be the woman who oversees the house, and the church, that the community meets in.

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Verses 1 & 4: The "truth" refers both to the "truth" talked about in John's Gospel - that is, Jesus - and to the proper teaching concerning Jesus in opposition to the "deceivers."

Verse 6: "From the beginning" refers back to the beginning of Jesus' teaching and ministry, the beginning and source of all Christian teaching, but also it refers *all* the way back to the beginning of Creation, to Jesus the Word, the source and beginning of all Creation

Verse 7: "antichrist" - literally, a "counter-Messiah," an opponent to the Christian teaching and belief that Jesus truly was God's Messiah, or Christ.

Verse 8: "What we have worked for" is the belief in the one who was sent, that is, Jesus.

- What do you make of verses 10-11? How do you feel about them? What does this advice mean for us today as Christians/Lutherans encountering dissension? Among the Christian or Lutheran communities? Within our country?

3 John General Notes:

Verse 1: There is nothing known about who Gaius was, apart from that the name "Gaius" was a common one among Roman citizens in this era and region.

Verses 3 & 5: The "friends" are members of a different Christian community passing through, and it had been recommended to them (probably) to avail themselves of Gaius' renowned hospitality.

Verse 7: "Non-believers" were apparently non-Christian Gentiles in general. Again, the community writing these letters had very strong Jewish roots.

Verse 9: Diotrefes: Again, there is nothing concrete known about who Diotrefes was. The main speculations are 1) that he was possibly the leader of the movement discussed in 2 (and 1) John; 2) that he was a church leader seeking to establish his own authority; and 3) that he was a church leader seeking to keep his church free from controversies.

Verses 9: "Does not acknowledge our authority" might mean that Diotrefes refused to welcome the elder and company.

- If Gaius is praised for hospitality and Diotrefes is criticized for a lack of it, how does that make sense in relation to the advice the elder gave in 2 John? (Also remember that any letter in the Bible is situational.)

Verse 11: Keep in mind that the good anyone is doing is still ultimately coming from God - the person who is "doing good" is by their actions visibly demonstrating God's grace and love.

Verse 12: Demetrius is another unknown; he may have delivered the letter.

Sources: HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Paul Achtemeier, Ed.; HarperCollins Study Bible, esp. articles on John's letters by David Rensberger.

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Additional Discussion Questions

How might we learn from this discussion of Church politics in our challenges today?

What is the message underneath all the controversy?

Did anything surprise you today?

Luther thought of the Scriptures as containing both Law and Gospel throughout, convicting us of our failures and then showing us God's grace. So...

Where in these books do you hear the Law? That is, what shows our sin, convicting us, driving us to seek God's grace?

Where in these books do you hear the Gospel? That is, what shows us God's future for us, our hope, God's grace in our lives?

Why do you think 2 & 3 John "made it in" to the Bible?

[General note: Some scholars feel that 3 John may have been included in the Scriptures as a kind of "tag-along": even if its content is not the fullest, they could tell that it went along with 1 & 2 John.]