

Living out Love

The date was sometime during the 90's – I mean 90 AD. About a century after Jesus' birth.

The place, somewhere around Ephesus – today located on the western coast of Turkey. If we read 2 John in isolation, it would be difficult to decipher what was going on. Who is “the elder”? Who is the “lady chosen by God”? What is the purpose of the letter? And why should we bother with reading it today?

The second letter of John is about dealing with a problem in the Church, and the proper response to that problem was to encourage a way of living that was modelled by Jesus Christ, our Lord. The defence against this threat was to follow a command: Love one another. If the command was easy to follow, I reckon the global Church would look very different today. And so it's a message that we need to pay attention to and receive, time and time again.

[Who's who]

Second John is traditionally considered one of three letters, or epistles, written by the gospel writer, John, one of Jesus' disciples. Now, many scholars believe that it wasn't written by John, but by another person going by the title “the presbyter” or “elder.” It is believed that these letters were written after the Gospel of John, and were addressed to Christians in the community that centred around that same gospel. Scholars would call this community the “Johannine Community” which was likely made up of a group of local house churches.¹

There is some dispute whether or not “elder” meant that he was old, or was an official title.²

However, it's clear that he wrote with some kind of authority over the church. It's commonly

¹ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxxii.

² Martin M Culy, *1, 2, 3 John: A Handbook on the Greek Text* (Waco, Tex: Baylor University Press, 2004), 141.

believed that the “elect lady” was a figurative way of referring to a church.³ The lack of any specific names also indicate that this letter was circulated and read in several communities, not just one.

[Background]

So what was going on? Well, there was a problem. A fairly serious problem that was threatening the communities. And if we read 2 John along with the other letters, a picture begins to emerge. We know that there were disputes going on. The early church was dividing because of different teachings.

One theory is that there were three groups of believers in the Johannine church.⁴ The first group were believers that were committed to apostolic teaching as they received it. The second group consisted of Jewish-Christians who believed that Jesus was the Messiah/Christ and still upheld Jewish tradition. The third were Hellenistic Christians who would have been influenced by a dualist background. Dualism, simply put, is a belief that there are two separate realities – the spiritual and the physical, and the physical was viewed as lesser of the two. These two different backgrounds affected how people saw Christ and who he was. The Jewish-Christians saw the humanity of Jesus more while the Hellenistic Christians emphasized his divinity. John's gospel was trying to present a balanced view of Christ who came as both fully man and fully God.⁵

By the time the letters were written, by some estimates about 10 years after the gospel, the

3 Culy, *1, 2, 3 John*, 141.

4 Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxiii.

5 Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxiii.

situation had progressed.⁶ Another group seem to have broken away from the Church. Certain people were teaching a different Christ – they were denying that Jesus is the Christ (1 John 2:22), and that Christ came in the flesh (2 John 1:7). And to emphasize his point, the Elder calls them *deceivers* and *antichrists*. The conflict was over Christology, but its impact was being felt physically; the different beliefs resulted in disunity and incompatibility to worship together.

[Church Division]

Two thousand years later, this isn't new news. We've seen thousands of years of strife within the Catholic, meaning universal, Church. Contrary to what I've been taught, the only major split wasn't the Reformation – when Protestants left the Roman Catholic Church. But, as you can see from the chart – the Church has branched into many parts: Assyrian, Oriental Orthodox, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Anglican, Protestant, Anabaptists, Restorationism.... and many more. Or you can see the Church like a tree – the universal church shares a common trunk, and common roots, and each church has their own particularity. But these branches were often a result of violent clashes, because it wasn't just about theological differences, but also about power and politics.

[Holy Sepulchre]

One living example of this is the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. The Holy Sepulchre houses the traditional site of Jesus' Crucifixion and burial. Beginning in the 4th century, the Holy Sepulchre has been a place of pilgrimage. The church building has been built, destroyed, and rebuilt time and time again. It is considered one of the holiest sites of Christendom - and

⁶ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, xxiii.

everyone wants a piece of it. Today it's the home of the Eastern Orthodox, Oriental Orthodox (which includes the Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian, and Armenian Church), and Roman Catholic Churches. However, sharing space over the centuries has not lead to peace between these communities. The conflict got so bad that in 1853, a "Status Quo" agreement was reached to regulate the use of the building by the different communities. No part of the designated common area may be even rearranged without consent from all communities. A symbol of this staus quo is a ladder that was left on the window ledge when the status quo was decreed. It has remained there ever since.

To give you an idea of the tension that's there, the fighting has been so bad that for the past several hundred years two Muslim families share the responsibility of opening and closing the church.⁷ In 2002 a fight broke out and eleven people were hospitalized when a Coptic Monk moved his chair into the shade. In 2008, a brawl broke out between priests and monks on Palm Sunday, even police were attacked. And what's even more sad, is that in 2009 Israeli authorities had taken advantage of this fighting by barring local, Jerusalem Christians from entering the Holy Sepulchre for a special service.⁸

When I was in that space, knowing some the history and the ongoing strife, it felt anything but holy. I was deeply saddened to see what could be a place of beautiful worship turned into a mini-war zone.

[Take a moment now to discuss with your neighbour what you think could threaten a community like ours – i.e. What are things that could divide us?]

⁷ "Church of the Holy Sepulchre - Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia."

⁸ "Jerusalem Christians Denied Access to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

The Elder's response to the threat to the Johannine community was simple, direct, and terribly difficult to do: Love one another.

This is a commandment, one that they've heard from the beginning, coming directly from the Lord. Love each other just as Christ has loved you.

[John 15:12-13 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.]⁹

Love isn't just an emotion – but obedience to God's commands. They were to “walk in it.” This was a Jewish expression, a way of talking about morality as “walking in or according to something.”¹⁰ They were to live out love, it's not just something you feel, but something you do. And it's hard to hear these words today without associating love with sex – where one “makes love” to another. But love meant something totally different to the early church. It meant sharing possessions with one another. Having meals together. Breaking bread together. Serving each other. Washing each other's feet. Teaching and worshipping together. Living life together. Protecting each other.

The false teaching was particularly threatening not just because it was different. But because what it said about Jesus. These teachers were denying that Christ came in the flesh. They were denying the Incarnation. To deny that the Son of God came to this world as a human

⁹ UNO all Biblical references are taken from the New International Version.

¹⁰ Witherington, *Letters and Homilies for Hellenized Christians*, 570.

being, is to deny the physicality of God's love. God's love is not a spiritual state, nor something abstract and ideal. But real and lived out. Love is God becoming one of us, defending the vulnerable, healing the sick, serving the poor, speaking out against injustices, being crucified, buried, and resurrected. To deny the humanity of Christ, was, in essence to deny God's love.

So the Elder was urgently requesting, insisting, that Christians love each other because the threat to their community was very real. The answer wasn't to fight back, to debate, or to make their worship services more flashy, but to increase their love for one another. Why?

[1 John 4:7-12 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.]

Isn't it interesting to think that God's love is incomplete if we don't love each other? That God's love is incomplete when we don't walk in love? This tells me something. That the Christian life is not just about thinking right thoughts and beliefs, it's not just about feeling warm and fuzzy inside, or even feeling remorse over your sins. But it's about living ethically as well. How we treat one another matters. It matters dearly to God and He's telling us that it's our duty to treat each other well. It's our duty to care for each other, to take a measure of responsibility for each other – especially when we see someone hurting.

This also means that though you might think you have nothing to offer, or that you're not

successful enough, good enough, rich enough or clever enough – in you is the capacity to love and to receive love. I've observed in people who are not “loving” are either extremely arrogant and think they deserve all the love in the world, or – and this is in most cases – they have difficulty receiving love, both from God and from people. We need to accept care from each other. And that also means valuing yourself enough to receive that care.

And this isn't just a command for pastors and priests, or elders and small group leaders. This ought to be the way of life for every Christian. The letters were addressed to the whole community, and to us today. Though we're not dealing with false teachers in our midst, hopefully, the problems we face now can only be resisted by loving community. How do we answer anxiety and fear? Love one another – you're not alone. How do we answer busyness and apathy? Love one another – put people first. How do we answer addictions, depression, and loneliness? Love one another – people care about you. This involves all of us – together.

Living out love means to give love and to receive it. Living out love means to give and to receive love in community.

Given our Christian history, it seems that every generation needs to learn what it means to live out love. No one, other than Christ, has been able to do this perfectly. But instead of waiting until we feel threatened by a problem, or a common enemy, can we not learn to love one another anyways? Are we not capable of doing better than the status quo?