

Pastor Steven J. Cole
Flagstaff Christian Fellowship
123 S. Beaver Street
Flagstaff, Arizona 86001
www.fcfonline.org

Rx FOR A HEALTHY CHURCH (Part 1)

2 John 1-6

By

Steven J. Cole

July 2, 2006

© Steven J. Cole, 2006

For access to previous sermons or to subscribe to weekly
sermons via email go to: www.fcfonline.org/sermons

Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture
Quotations are from the New American
Standard Bible, Updated Edition
© The Lockman Foundation

July 2, 2006
2 John Lesson 1

Rx for a Healthy Church (Part 1)
2 John 1-6

If you have a desire to see God's kingdom come, then at times you probably nostalgically think about the New Testament church and imagine, "It must have been wonderful to be a part of the church in that time!" If only we could duplicate that now!

Imagine being a part of a church that had been founded about 30 years previously by the apostle Paul. Timothy had served as a pastor there. After he moved on, none other than the venerable apostle John had shepherded the flock. Wouldn't it be great to be a part of a church like that!

I've just described the church at Ephesus. Most scholars agree that John wrote his first letter to that church (and other churches in that area), sometime around 85-90 A.D. But as we saw in our study of that letter, that church had some difficult problems. False teachers had arisen in the church, who claimed to have deeper knowledge of the things of God. They claimed to have the secret to knowing Christ, but in reality, they denied His bodily incarnation and His deity. They taught many other heretical concepts. Their motive may have been to take some elements of pagan religion and blend them with Christianity, in order to make it more acceptable to the pagan culture (Glenn Barker, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* [Zondervan], ed. by Frank Gaebelin, 12:296).

When the godly church leaders confronted their errors, these men left the church to form their own churches, taking people with them, resulting in major conflict (1 John 2:19). As in any church split, relationships were strained or severed. People were confused and hurt. Rumors and false allegations circulated. So there was a need for godly leaders to bring the church back to the basics of the faith. Every church needs to be strong in the knowledge of the truth so that the members can avoid destructive heresies. They need to be strong in loving relationships. They need to be holy in their conduct. Without these things, the church will be unhealthy and thus more susceptible to the subtle deception of the enemy.

John probably wrote the short letter of 2 John to a local church as a brief follow-up to his first letter. He repeats many of the same ideas and addresses some of the same problems. Apparently, the false teachers were traveling around, trying to come into the churches under the guise of godly teachers who could take you farther in your Christian faith (2 John 9). But they denied essential truth about Jesus Christ. So John writes this short letter before he could make a personal visit, to warn the church about not receiving these men into their midst. In doing so, he gives us a prescription for a healthy church.

There are two parts: First, for the church to be healthy, she must be sensitive to the life within (1-6). Second, she must be on guard to the dangers without (7-13). We will look at the first part today and the second part in our next study.

For the church to be healthy, she must be
sensitive to the life within.

There are two major interpretive problems in 2 John. First, who is "the elder" who writes this letter (and 3 John)? Second, who is "the chosen lady and her children" to whom it is written?

Without going into the scholarly debates, I believe that "the elder" was the apostle John. He was so well known to this local church that he didn't need to mention his given name. The terms "elder," "overseer" (or, "bishop"), and "pastor" ("shepherd") are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to local church leaders (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1-2). John was an apostle, who had authority from Christ over all of the churches. But, he was also a part of a local congregation, where he served as elder. The apostle Peter referred to himself as an elder in this same sense (1 Pet. 5:1). Due to John's age and the fact that he was the last surviving apostle, perhaps the churches nicknamed him "the elder," *par excellence*. It is a title both of respect and authority.

With regard to the question of "the chosen lady and her children," there are two views. Some think that it refers to a specific woman and her offspring (John MacArthur adopts this view, *The MacArthur Study Bible* [Thomas Nelson], p. 1946). With this view, the "children of your chosen sister" (v. 13) would be the nieces and nephews of this woman. But most commentators lean toward the

view that it is a cryptic reference to a local church and its members. "The children of your chosen sister" would then be the members of another local church. If the church was going through any persecution, referring to it in this cryptic manner would provide some protection if this letter fell into the wrong hands.

We cannot be dogmatic but I think that John wrote 2 John to a local church. The language, especially John's affirmation of love and exhortation to love (1, 5), seems more appropriate to a church than to an individual woman. If it was written to an individual, verse 4 would require that she had several children, some of whom were following the truth. Also, in verses 6, 8, 10, and 12, John addresses his readers in the second person plural, which would point to the members of a local church. The imagery of a church as a chosen lady fits with the church as the bride of Christ. In a similar way, Peter calls the church in Rome, "she who is in Babylon, chosen together with you" (1 Pet. 5:13).

The immediate problem John is addressing in both 2 and 3 John is that of traveling teachers that were circulating among the churches. They were generally received into the church and given hospitality in various homes. But what if the teacher claimed to be a Christian, but taught false doctrine? Should he be received or not? Second John warns against receiving and encouraging such false teachers, whereas 3 John encourages genuine hospitality towards true teachers.

John had recently had contact with some of the members of this church. He commends the church that these members were walking in the truth (v. 4). He is not necessarily implying that others were not walking in the truth, but rather, he was glad that those whom he had met were walking in the truth. In verses 1-6, he gives a fourfold prescription for the life within the church if we want the church to be healthy:

1. The life within the church centers on a personal relationship with the Father through the Son, based on His sovereign grace.

This idea underlies the entire letter, but it is especially obvious in the salutation (1-3). Both in verse 1 and in verse 13, John uses the adjective *chosen* to refer to these two churches. This does not

refer to our choosing God, but rather to His choosing us to be His people. The initiative in salvation lies with God's sovereign choice. When you choose to believe in Jesus Christ, it is because God has first chosen you for salvation. God did not choose us because He saw that we would choose Him or because He saw great potential in us. Rather, He chose us through grace alone. This robs us of any source of pride.

Why does John emphasize God's choice both at the start and close of this short letter? I believe that it is because the reality that God chose us to be His children gives comfort when we are under attack or going through trials. These churches had gone through turmoil when the false teachers caused confusion and division. It would be a comfort to be reminded that God had initiated their salvation and He would complete what He started (Phil. 1:6). The false teachers would not and could not undermine what God sovereignly purposes to do in His church.

The threefold opening greeting (v. 3), "Grace, mercy and peace," occurs elsewhere only in 1 & 2 Timothy. B. F. Westcott (*The Epistles of St. John* [Eerdmans], p. 225) observes, "The succession 'grace, mercy, peace' marks the order from the first motion of God to the final satisfaction of man." Any relationship with God begins not with our seeking God, but rather with His sovereign grace reaching down to us. As Paul puts it (Rom. 5:6), "For while we were still helpless, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly" (not, "for pretty good folks who were making an effort to seek God"). *Grace* is God's unmerited favor to the *ungodly* who deserve His wrath.

"Mercy" points to God's compassion towards us in our misery that is due to our sin. The focus of God's *grace* is more towards our guilt and need for forgiveness of sins, whereas *mercy* is directed towards relieving the devastating consequences of our sins.

"Peace" points to the result of salvation, both to the peace of God in our hearts and to the peace that we enjoy with God because of the cross of Christ. We are reconciled to God because Christ bore the penalty in our place. The cross removed the barrier to fellowship with God, so that now we can enter His presence as His children and know that we are accepted.

John's salutation varies from the usual form of a prayer, "Grace, mercy, and peace be with you." Rather, John emphatically (in the Greek text) states, "Grace, mercy, and peace *will be* with us." Then, after "from God the Father and from Jesus Christ," he adds, "the Son of the Father, in truth and love."

Each of these variations from the norm reflects something of John's concern in writing this brief letter (Colin Kruse, *The Letters of John* [Eerdmans/Apollos], p. 206; the following observations are from him). The emphatic *will be with us* reassures his readers that God will not abandon them, in spite of what the secessionists might say. He uses "us" rather than "you" to "reinforce the sense of their community of love." The truth that these blessings come not only from the Father, but also "from Jesus Christ, the Son of the Father," brings out the truth of the deity of Jesus, in opposition to the teaching of the heretics. "In truth and love" probably means that these blessings are experienced by those who continue to hold to the truth and practice love for one another, which the heretics failed to do.

The application of John's opening greeting is that being a part of a local church is not primarily a matter of attending services or joining the church, as important as those things are. Rather, it is a matter of coming into a personal relationship with God through His Son, Jesus Christ. To be a part of His church means that you have personally experienced His grace, mercy, and peace through His salvation. And it means that you hold firmly to the truth about Jesus Christ, as we will examine more in a moment.

At times I have encountered people who believe in Christ as Savior and Lord, but they join or remain in a liberal church that denies the need for the new birth and the atoning work of Christ. They do this "to have a ministry" there. Such churches may be a mission field, but they are not really churches at all, in the biblical sense of the word. But the point of missions is to get people out of their pagan religion and into healthy local churches where they can grow and serve. To evangelize people in a liberal church and then leave them there goes against the New Testament teaching on the nature and purpose of the local church. The church is a body of people who have a saving relationship with the Father through His Son because of His sovereign grace.

2. The life within the church is founded on the truth about Jesus Christ.

John is obviously concerned about the truth. He uses that word five times in the first four verses. For John, the concept of truth centers on the person of Jesus Christ. The heretics were deceiving people about the person of Christ (v. 7), saying either that He did not have a real human body, or that "the Christ" came upon the man Jesus at His baptism and left just prior to His crucifixion. These errors went against the person of Jesus that John had seen, heard, and touched (1 John 1:1-4). Wrong views of the person of Christ invariably spill over into wrong views on His work on the cross. If you deny Jesus' true humanity, then He could not be the substitute for the sins of humans. So it is essential to hold to sound doctrine on the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Christianity is not based on the religious speculations of philosophers, but rather upon the revelation of God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ. The apostles spent three years with Jesus and they bear witness in the New Testament to His life, teachings, miracles, death, resurrection, and ascension into heaven. They make it clear that He is God in human flesh. The church of Jesus Christ is, therefore, a community of those who (literally, v. 1) "have come to know the truth." In verse 2 John personifies truth with reference to Jesus Himself, who claimed to be the truth (John 14:6). John says the truth "abides in us and will be with us forever."

Contrary to the current prevalent postmodern philosophy, the New Testament affirms that truth is both absolute and knowable. The truth centers in all that the Old and New Testaments affirm about Jesus Christ. To know Him personally is to be in the truth. This does not mean that you must become a theologian or be able to explain all of the biblical teaching about Christ and salvation in order to get saved. To be saved, you simply must recognize that you are a sinner in need of a Savior and that Jesus is that Savior. Trust in Him and He will save you.

But it does mean that as a believer, you should grow in your understanding of the truth about Jesus Christ and salvation. Sound doctrine on these matters is crucial. The main difference between the Jehovah's Witnesses, who are not saved, and those who are truly saved, centers on the doctrine of the deity of Jesus Christ.

When John talks about “some of your children *walking* in truth,” the word *walk* implies that truth is something that every believer must continually grow in over time.

So the first mark of a healthy church is that the members know God personally through a saving relationship with Jesus Christ. The second mark is that they walk in the truth about Christ.

3. The life within the church expresses itself in love.

John is concerned about *both* truth and love. He uses *love* four times in these six verses. Truth and love cannot be separated. Liberals set aside truth and make love for everyone the basis of unity, no matter what they believe. On the other hand, some fighting Fundamentalists exalt the truth on even minor issues over love, and thus cause divisions among those who truly know and follow Jesus Christ.

Truth on the essentials of the gospel must be the basis for fellowship and unity. If someone denies the essentials of the gospel, he is not a Christian and we have no basis for true fellowship. As we will see in verse 10, if someone is promoting false teaching, the loving thing to do is not to welcome him as a brother, but to separate from him as someone promoting evil. So our love for others must be discerning (Phil. 1:9).

If someone came to your door who was infected with a highly contagious disease, such as tuberculosis, you would not be acting in love to your family to welcome him to come in and stay with you. Since false doctrine about the person and work of Christ is a deadly, infectious disease, it is not loving to welcome those who are infected with this disease into our church or homes. We will look more at this next week. But, among those who truly know and love Jesus Christ in truth, we must be loving, especially when we disagree over minor issues.

4. The life within the church is maintained through obedience.

John has emphasized truth (5 times) and love (4 times). He also emphasizes obedience. The word *commandment* occurs 4 times in verses 4-6. As you know, these are the three tests of 1 John: authentic Christianity consists of believing the truth about Jesus Christ, loving one another, and obeying God’s commandments.

John says (v. 6) that we are to “walk according to His commandments.” These commandments involve the truth (v. 4) and love (vv. 5, 6). When John emphasizes that his readers had these commandments “from the beginning” (5, 6), he means that Jesus Christ gave us these commandments and that obeying them should be basic, first-level Christian teaching. The first thing a new believer should learn is that being a Christian means obeying Jesus as Lord. And, a key commandment of Jesus is that we love one another. As we’ve seen, biblical love is not primarily a feeling, but rather a matter of the will that can be commanded. It is a self-sacrificing, caring commitment that seeks the highest good of the one loved.

It is a tragedy that many evangelical churches are wracked with dissension because self-centered, power-driven people who profess to know Christ force their way on the church. We will see this illustrated in the case of Diotrephes, “who loves to be first among them” (3 John 9). This is usually done under some “pious” cause: “I’m defending the truth!” But invariably, it is not truth that is essential to the gospel. Power-driven people are motivated by pride or self-will. They need to be confronted with their disobedience to Christ’s commandment of love.

Conclusion

When I was seeking a place of ministry after seminary, I talked to the pulpit committee of a church in the Southern California mountains. They did not call me, but I ended up accepting the pastorate of another church in the neighboring community. A year or two later, the first church asked me to arbitrate a conflict that had developed. The chairman of the deacon board had sent a letter to the congregation criticizing their new pastor on three counts: he wasn’t feeding the flock; he was quoting liberals in the pulpit; and, he wasn’t visiting the flock. He urged the church to withhold their giving and force the pastor out.

At the meeting, I asked whether the deacon had first gone privately to the pastor to discuss these matters. He had not done so. Then I asked for clarification. I asked the pastor if he worked each week to study the Word to prepare biblical sermons. He did. I asked who the liberals were. It was C. S. Lewis! I asked if his job

description had any requirement of how many hours a week he was expected to visit the congregation. It said nothing about this.

After I heard what was going on, I confronted the deacon with violating Scripture in a self-centered attempt to grab power for himself. I warned him of the verse that says that if anyone destroys God's temple, the church, God will destroy him (1 Cor. 3:17). In front of all, I called on him to repent of his sinful behavior. When we closed in prayer, he piously prayed, "Lord, I forgive my brother for all of the wrong things he has said about me." But, thankfully, the church disciplined the man by removing him from office, and the pastor was able to serve there for a few more years.

If we wistfully think that the early church did not have these sorts of problems, we're not reading our Bibles carefully. Both 2 and 3 John show that even a church founded by Paul and later pastored by Timothy and John had serious problems. This means that we will have problems, too, if we stand for God's truth. Everyone who takes a stand for God's truth will be slandered for being unloving. The solution is not to compromise the truth or to become unloving in defending the truth. Neither is the solution to abandon the church because of the problems.

Rather, we must maintain a close personal relationship with the Father through the Son, based on His sovereign grace. We must hold tenaciously to the truth about Jesus Christ and the gospel. We must love one another. And, we must obey Jesus Christ. That is part one of John's prescription for a healthy church.

Application Questions

1. Why should a genuine profession of faith in Christ be the primary requirement for church membership?
2. How do we decide which truths must never be compromised, versus where we should be tolerant for the sake of unity?
3. Should we love those who deny essential truth about Christ and the gospel? If so, how? See Jude 22-23.
4. Some contend that if you advocate obedience, you are legalistic. How would you respond?

Copyright, Steven J. Cole, 2006, All Rights Reserved.