

Walk In True Love: An Exegesis of II John

James R. Janke

“Is it true love?” That’s what Hollywood watchers have been asking ever since 42-year-old Tom Cruise gave 26-year-old Katie Holmes an engagement ring on June 17th in the shadow of the Eiffel Tower. Cynics point to the fact that the engagement coincided with the opening of the new movies in which the two are appearing (*War of the Worlds* and *Batman Begins*, respectively), and suggest that the whole thing is nothing more than a publicity stunt. Romantics on the other hand cling to the hope that true love is not dead and that this is the real thing. For what it’s worth about 2/3 of the people asked thought the whole thing was just a publicity stunt. So which is it, true love or publicity stunt?

Now it’s entirely possible that you aren’t particularly interested in whether it’s true love between Tom and Katie, but we must not for that reason simply ignore the question: “Is it true love?” That’s because the whole law of God can be summed up in one word—love. The Savior said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself.”¹ “Love is the fulfillment of the law.”² Love is what the law requires of us toward God, our neighbor and even our enemies. So what about us? Is it true love that we show toward our God? Is it true love that we show toward our brothers and sisters in Christ? Is it true love that we show toward our fellow men, even those who may be enemies of the truth of God’s Word? That was the concern of St. John when he wrote the letter we call II John. That letter is an encouragement to God’s people to walk in true love, true love first of all for our friends in the truth, and true love also for the enemies of the truth.

Walk In True Love

I. True love for our friends in the truth (vv.1-6)

1 Ὁ πρεσβύτερος ἐκλεκτῆ κυρία καὶ τοῖς τέκνοις αὐτῆς, οὓς ἐγὼ ἀγαπῶ ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, καὶ οὐκ ἐγὼ μόνος ἀλλὰ καὶ πάντες οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν, 2 διὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν τὴν μένουσαν ἐν ἡμῖν καὶ μεθ’ ἡμῶν ἔσται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα.

The elder, to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not I alone, but also all who have come to know the truth, because of the truth, which lives in us, and will be with us forever.

There is some irony in the fact that a group known in some quarters as the “oldies” has gathered this Labor Day to study a letter written by “the elder.” This elder, however, isn’t just any grumpy old man of the cloth. It is the Apostle John. There have been some who question John’s authorship of the second and third letters that are assigned to him in the New Testament; a comparison of the language used in I John with that of II and III John, however, will confirm that they were all written by the same author.³ What convinces us that the author is the Apostle John? Remember that the consensus of early church history is that John, the son of Zebedee and brother of James, was the only one of the Twelve who did not suffer a martyr’s death, that he lived until near the end of the first century A.D. and served the churches in Ephesus and the surrounding area of Asia Minor. In view of this information, it would seem that only the Apostle John, in view of his age and apostolic authority, could have referred to himself as “the elder” without any further explanation and fully expect his readers to recognize him.

II John is addressed to “the chosen lady and her children.” The Greek word for lady, *κυρία*, may be the proper name “Cyria,” in which case the letter is intended for a Christian woman with whom John was familiar, or it may be a figurative way of referring to a church since the word for “church” in Greek is feminine. The former understanding appears to have more problems than the latter. It is admittedly not inconceivable that St. John knew a woman named Cyria; that he had met some of her children who were walking in the truth; that he wrote to encourage the rest of her family to do the same; that she had a sister who lived in Ephesus; and that John includes greetings from her sister in his letter to Cyria and her family. While it is conceivable that all those

stars could align, there are convincing clues in the context which indicate that the letter is written to a church and its members rather than a specific woman and her children.⁴ The letter was no doubt sent out from Ephesus, but it is impossible to say in what city the church that is addressed was located.

John says the Christians he addresses in his letter are people: οὓς ἐγὼ ἀγαπῶ, “whom I myself love.” The author of our letter is the “disciple whom Jesus loved.” That title did not arise from arrogance but from astonishment. John wasn’t all that loveable; he could be self-absorbed⁵ and short-tempered⁶ but Jesus loved him anyway. John learned about love from the Lord’s love for him. He wrote in his first letter: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”⁷ It was the love he had learned from Jesus that prompted him to write this letter. The word St. John uses for love, *agape*, has become a standard part of the Christian lexicon. It refers to a kind of love that is not merely a feeling based on emotion or affection but love that is a choice prompted by the will and guided by the intellect. We see such love personified in God. God didn’t like the foul, stinking, sinful world, but he loved it, desired its salvation, saw what needed to be done and acted on its behalf by sending his Son to redeem it by his life, death and resurrection.

The Apostle declares that he loves the members of this congregation ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, “in connection with truth.” Four times in the first three verses, twice without and twice with the definite article, the word ἀλήθεια, “truth” appears. Lacking the article here, St. John could be professing the sincerity of his love for God’s people; asserting that he truly or sincerely loves them. The fact that Greek has an adverb John could have used (ἀληθῶς) to express that thought, and the context which contains two subsequent references to “the truth,” seem to connect his love with a specific truth—“the truth.” The rest of John’s writings indicate that the specific truth he has in mind is the truth which Christ came to reveal, the Christian truth contained in the words of Christ and his apostles, the heart of which is the Gospel of the grace of God in Jesus his Son.⁸

John was not alone in his love for the Christians in the congregation to which his letter is addressed. He says his love is shared by πάντες οἱ ἐγνωκότες τὴν ἀλήθειαν, “all who have come to know the truth.” The whole church, all those who have come to know (ἐγνωκότες: perfect of γινώσκω) the truth, not just in their heads (that would be οἶδα) but with blessed effect in their hearts and lives, was concerned about the spiritual health and welfare of this congregation.

St. John underscores in the second verse that the love Christians have for one another is a love that is grounded in the truth. Their love is διὰ τὴν ἀλήθειαν, “on account of the truth.” The Apostle further asserts that this is the truth τὴν μένουσαν ἐν ἡμῖν, “which continues to live in us.” These Christians not only know that there is such a thing as objective, absolute truth; they, like the Apostle, have it within them. Not only that, the Apostle affirms with confidence that the truth will continue to be with them. He emphasizes the last thought by using a finite clause καὶ μεθ’ ἡμῶν ἔσται εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα, which we might translate: “And with us it will be forever.” It’s noteworthy that this letter, which may be best known for its instructions on how to deal with false teachers, begins with a confident affirmation that “the truth” exists and will continue to dwell with those who humbly but firmly hold to it, in spite of the worst efforts of its enemies.

Several things about St. John’s address jump out at the reader. First of all it is clear that in the Apostle’s mind there is such a thing as truth; it is available and knowable. Apostle of love that he was, John did not consider it arrogant or unseemly to lay claim to the truth in the first century; nor is it that for those today who remain in the teaching of Christ. The arrogance and unseemliness lies rather with those who in spite of Scripture’s clear teaching proclaim the truth to be “out there” perhaps, but ultimately unknowable. Let some criticize as divisive and rude those who lay claim to the truth; St. John knew that there was such a thing and he knew that Christian truth unites.

That’s the second striking thing about John’s address. Notice how John weaves together the concepts of truth and love. Friends of the truth are friends of each other, and earnestly desire each other’s highest good. It’s a good reminder that St. John has for us at the beginning of his second letter. These are times when brothers are suspicious of each other; when rumor and innuendo abound. What is the solution? Some would say we all need to be more tolerant; St. John would say we need to dig into the truth which is in us and will be with us forever. Find out what God says about the issues that threaten to divide us. *Ubi veritas, ibi unitas.*

3 ἔσται μεθ' ἡμῶν χάρις ἔλεος εἰρήνη παρὰ θεοῦ πατρὸς καὶ παρὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς ἐν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγάπῃ.

There will be grace, mercy and peace with us from God the Father, and from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son, in connection with truth and love.

In Greek letter writing the name of the writer and the identity of the recipients were followed by a greeting; a wish or prayer for peace or good health.⁹ John's greeting here departs somewhat from that formula in as much as it is not merely a wish or even a prayer, but a confident assertion. As God's people remain in the unity they enjoy, a unity founded on the truth of God's Word and exhibited in selfless love, they will enjoy God's gifts of grace, mercy and peace. Grace is God's undeserved love toward us sinners; mercy is his pity for those who are in misery and distress; peace is the well-being that results when grace and mercy are ours. "Put together, peace indicates the character of salvation, mercy our need of it and grace God's free provision of it in Christ."¹⁰

The blessings of grace, mercy and peace come "from God the Father," (παρὰ θεοῦ πατρὸς) and "from Jesus Christ, the Father's Son" (παρὰ Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ τοῦ υἱοῦ τοῦ πατρὸς). Note that both the preposition παρὰ, and "the Father" are repeated. By repeating the preposition, St. John emphasizes the equality of the Son with the Father as the source of the blessings of grace, mercy and peace. By repeating "the Father," St. John stresses what he means when he calls Jesus "the Son," namely, that he is the eternal Son of the Father, coequal with him in divinity; possessing with him all the attributes of the Deity. Already here the Apostle has his eye on the deceivers he will deal with shortly in more detail.

Once again at the end of his greeting St. John joins truth and love. He says that his readers will have grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and the Son ἐν ἀληθείᾳ καὶ ἀγάπῃ, "in connection with" or "in the sphere of truth and love." The single preposition with two nouns connected by καὶ puts both truth and love in the same "sphere." St. John is saying that truth and love go hand in hand so that where the truth is there true love will be, and where true love is there the truth will be. That really only stands to reason since the truth will (and only the truth can) produce true love, and since only that love is true love which is grounded in the truth. That means there is no conflict between the truth, as God tells us to proclaim it or guard it (by practicing biblical fellowship principles, for example), and love—true love, that is.

4 Ἐχάρην λίαν ὅτι εὔρηκα ἐκ τῶν τέκνων σου περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, καθὼς ἐντολὴν ἐλάβομεν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς.

I rejoiced greatly because I have found some of your children continuing to walk in connection with truth, just as we received command from the Father.

Like Paul in many of his letters, St. John begins the body of his second letter with an expression of joy and thanksgiving. He says, Ἐχάρην λίαν ὅτι εὔρηκα, literally that is, "I rejoiced (the verb is a second aorist passive in form but active in meaning) greatly." This joy arose, John says, "because I have found," ἐκ τῶν τέκνων σου περιπατοῦντας ἐν ἀληθείᾳ, "some" (the word is lacking in Greek but is expressed by the prepositional phrase) "of your children continuing to walk" (the present participle indicates continuing action) "in connection with truth." Perhaps as the result of a visit paid to him by some of the members of this church,¹¹ or from news that had reached him,¹² the Apostle has become aware of the fact that some of the members of this congregation are walking in the truth. What does it mean to walk on the path of truth?

St. John explains when he says that the conduct of these "children," was καθὼς ἐντολὴν ἐλάβομεν παρὰ τοῦ πατρὸς, "just as we have received commandment from the Father." To know what it means to walk on the path of truth, just look at the commandment that has been received from the Father. St. John summarized the Father's commandment in his first letter this way: "This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us."¹³ "Walking in connection with truth" means exhibiting "moral purity and sincerity as a natural outflow of the Christian truth, the Gospel, and faith in the

Gospel.”¹⁴ Faith and love; there is the simple summary of the commandment received from the Father.

Notice that in the mind of the Apostle the “truth,” though it “lives in us” (v.2), is not merely a set of principles or facts to be filed away somewhere in the brain. The truth lies before us like a path on which we walk. The Apostle’s words are a good reminder for us as we struggle to put into practice the truths or principles God reveals in his Word, whether they are those dealing with the roles of men and women in the church, worship or fellowship principles. Just as the Gospel is given to us to believe, so those principles are given to us to be applied in our lives. Yes, it may be a struggle, and yes, there may be “questions of casuistry,” but to walk in the truth means that we need to be careful about being content to “agree on principles” and blithely dismiss a seemingly endless array of (often antithetical) practices in our midst as mere “differences in application.”

A Seminary Professor of mine wrote in regard to applications of the biblical principles of the role of women in the church, words that are equally pertinent to biblical fellowship principles:

That consensus is our common goal is a non-debatable premise for those in a truly confessional church body. Such a church body presupposes unity in doctrine *and a practice that reflects such unity* (emphasis mine). The consensus dare not, however, be an agreement to disagree about Scripture teaching. It dare not be reached by a resort to the weak-kneed conclusion that difficulties in practical application of a doctrine warrant an adjustment in the doctrine. It dare not be a stalemate situation that continues indefinitely while ‘further study’ goes on and on and on.¹⁵

The children of the elect lady were able to walk in the truth to the point where someone could tell that they were; with God’s help I’m sure we in the WELS can too.

John’s language doesn’t require us to assume that only some and not all of the members of this church were walking in the truth. It could be that John is referring only to those members he met, perhaps when they visited Ephesus or those specifically mentioned by those who brought him news. If we assume, however, as some¹⁶ do that II John and III John were written at the same time to the same church, we would conclude that besides knowing that some of the members were walking in the truth, John is also aware of others, like Diotrophes. Diotrophes is described in III John as one who “loves to be first,” and “will have nothing to do with”¹⁷ the faithful teachers sent out by St. John. III John 10 says that Diotrophes is gossiping maliciously about the Apostle, and continues: “Not satisfied with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers.” If the above assumptions are true, that John wrote the two letters at the same time and was aware of some who opposed the truth, it adds urgency to his instructions regarding false teachers and how to deal with them. The following words in vv.5 and 6 would then be intended to encourage the faithful and recall those who have gone astray.

5 καὶ νῦν ἐρωτῶ σε, κυρία, οὐχ ὡς ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω σοι ἀλλὰ ἣν εἶχομεν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους. 6 καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη, ἵνα περιπατῶμεν κατὰ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ· αὕτη ἡ ἐντολή ἐστίν, καθὼς ἠκούσατε ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἐν αὐτῇ περιπατῆτε.

And now I’m asking you, lady—not as writing to you a new command but that which we’ve had from the beginning—that we love one another. And this is that love: that we walk according to his commands. That command, as you’ve heard it from the beginning, is that we walk in (love.)

The previous verse, with its commendation of those who were walking in the truth already implies an encouragement for the rest of the congregation to do the same. But just so there is no mistake, John states his desire for all the members of the congregation to walk in the truth in a dignified and formal way in verse 5. He says: καὶ νῦν ἐρωτῶ σε, κυρία “And now I’m asking you, lady...” We might expect the content of the Apostle’s request to follow immediately, but instead John inserts a parenthetical clause which explains that in making this request he is οὐχ ὡς ἐντολὴν καινὴν γράφω σοι ἀλλὰ ἣν εἶχομεν ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, “not as writing to you a new command but which we were having from the beginning.”

Written like a true oldie. John has a noble goal in mind for his readers. The final clause of v.5 contains the contents of his request. It is: ἵνα ἀγαπῶμεν ἀλλήλους, “that we continue to love one another.” But notice that to achieve this lofty goal St. John doesn’t form a new committee, initiate a new program or even issue a new

command. Right up front he informs his readers that he is not “writing... a new commandment;” just the will of God as they’d heard it from the very beginning of their new lives of faith in Christ. Yet, St. John knew there was something new about this old command. In his first letter he wrote: “Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining.”¹⁸ “The old commandment, at the same time, is ever new, insomuch as one can never become a master of it and satisfy its demands. One must start over again and again.”¹⁹ That means returning again and again penitently to the cross which proclaims the love of God because of which “we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning.”²⁰

“Love one another.” That seems pretty self-explanatory, doesn’t it? The elder didn’t think so. He didn’t want there to be any misunderstanding of his old command so he writes in v.6: *καὶ αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἀγάπη, ἵνα περιπατῶμεν κατὰ τὰς ἐντολὰς αὐτοῦ* “And this is love: that we walk according to his commands.” These words need to be read with I John 3:23 in view where St. John explains more fully the Father’s commands. He writes there: “This is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us.” With those words John reminds us that the love he has in mind is not independent of faith and the Gospel, but includes them; indeed, true love is born of faith and the Gospel.

Two things jump out in the Apostle’s definition of love. First he underscores what is inherent in the concept of *agape* love, namely, that it is not just a warm, fuzzy feeling inside, but a “continuing to walk” in God’s commands. This is true of the love we show for God. St. John wrote in his first letter: “This is love for God: to obey his commands.”²¹ This is true also of the love we show for our neighbor. He also wrote in his first letter: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.”²²

Second, St. John underscores that true love is walking “according to his (the Father’s) commands.” Love undirected by God’s revealed will may easily degenerate into unwise, sentimental activity. Love disconnected from what God commands may invent its own ways of dealing with issues—false teachers—for example, and in the end may fail to be true love at all. Professor Forrest Bivens writes in this regard:

We assume proponents of false ecumenism imagine that they are showing love and accomplishing what is good for people. Practicing church fellowship without regard for confessional unity is perhaps done in the hope that such activity will bring people closer to God and to each other. But this cannot happen if the truth of Scripture is neglected. Early in this century Adolf Hoenecke identified the basic flaw in such thinking: ‘All unionism is based on the assumption that the truth of Scripture will not be urged in earnest, especially not in so far as it condemns all errors, even the smallest, and warns against them as poison to the soul. For as soon as this would be done such a union would collapse.’²³

St. John reminds us that “true love does not invent its own course of action, but humbly follows the road which God has appointed in his commandments. ‘Just remember,’ he would say, ‘what God requires of you in the second Table of the Law, then you will know how to practice brotherly love well-pleasing to God.’ True love never chooses its own way.”²⁴

Does anyone still not get it? Does anyone still think of love as a mere emotion rather than truth-guided motion? Anyone still think of love as a self-chosen path rather than a walk in God’s commands? St. John circles back again in v.6 to disabuse his readers of any such ideas. He writes: *αὕτη ἡ ἐντολή ἐστίν, καθὼς ἠκούσατε ἀπ’ ἀρχῆς, ἵνα ἐν αὐτῇ περιπατῆτε*, “This is the command, as you heard it from the beginning, that you keep walking in (love).” The statement serves to show that “love” and “God’s commandment” are virtually interchangeable; as Christians we can truly practice love only by doing what God tells us to do, and, conversely, what God tells us to do is always love.²⁵ Since the second part of the verse is a reverse way of saying what the first part of the verse said St. John could be accused of arguing in a something of a circle. It is, however, an effective way of driving home his points about the truth or God’s command (which is “God’s truth as it tells us what to do”²⁶) and love. Those points are that true love is *walking* and not just talking *in the way of God’s commands* and not the way of one’s own choosing.

A few observations may be in order as we come to the end of the first main part of II John. First note John's emphasis on *brotherly* love. Note the warmth of his love for those who are his friends in the truth. As Christians we are to love our neighbors and even our enemies; but we are bound to our fellow Christians by the special bond of truth. This means that we have a special obligation to love our brothers and sisters in faith. St. Paul seems to have that in mind when he writes: "As we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers."²⁷ I think it is fair to say that we have given due emphasis in recent years to those who do not belong to the family of believers (think of the countless new programs designed to evangelize those on the outside, the new forms of worship designed to appeal to the unchurched, etc.), but I wonder if we always keep in mind the "especially those who belong to the family of believers" part? St. John speaks of those he loves "in the truth." Is it possible that while we have been rightly zealous in our love for the unchurched, we have neglected the debt of love we owe each other as friends in the truth?

Take as an example the area of worship and liturgy. We all agree with Article X of the Formula of Concord which says:

We believe, teach and confess also that no Church should condemn another because one has less or more external ceremonies not commanded by God than the other, if otherwise there is agreement among them in doctrine and all its articles, as also in the right use of the holy Sacraments, according to the well-known saying: *Dissonantia ieiunii non dissolvit consonantiam fidei*, Disagreement in fasting does not destroy agreement in faith.

That being said, there is some wisdom to be found in the observation that

uniformity in the order of service and ministerial forms of churches belonging to the same body is *very desirable* (emphasis mine), especially in these days, when many people move about from one place to another and travel and visit much; they can then not only readily take part in the service, but will also at once feel at home. Insistence on independence ceases to be a virtue when it tends to disorder and lack of cooperation.²⁸

Our own pastoral theology textbook in speaking of liturgical innovations warns against making changes "just to satisfy some whim of the pastor," and urges that care be taken beforehand "in order that proper consideration might also be shown for sister congregations."²⁹

This is not to say that the innovative have a monopoly on falling behind on their payments on the debt of love we owe each other. This oldie will admit to frequent frustration and thoughts that are not right. This happens, for example, when I Corinthians 9:22,23³⁰ is waved around as a justification for any and every innovation that comes along in worship and ministry. I will admit that (in an occasional snit) I entertain the thought that if someone could, it would be good to forbid the use of those verses unless those who quote them give at least as much time to the verses in the same letter from the same Apostle which read: "Therefore if what I eat causes my brother to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause him to sin,"³¹ and "Everything is permissible"—but not everything is beneficial. 'Everything is permissible'—but not everything is constructive. Nobody should seek his own good, but the good of others."³² Why the snit? What possible harm can come from everyone doing what is right in his own eyes without concern for others?

One answer is given by Pastor Klemet Preus, in his book *The Fire and The Staff*. In it he describes a personal experience that reveals the harm that comes from unrestrained innovation in worship. He writes:

I talked to a pastor of a large Lutheran congregation employing all the techniques described in this chapter ("*praise*" or "*contemporary*" type worship; "*providential*" preaching; ministry focused on "*felt needs*;" etc.). I serve a congregation that more closely resembles your grandfather's Lutheran church. I asked this pastor, 'If one of your members moved into my area and came to my church one Sunday and then went to the local Evangelical church with the 'praise services,' 'practical preaching,' 'seeker services,' and exhortational or providential preaching the next Sunday, which church would that member join?' The pastor thought about it for more than a couple of seconds. 'I don't know,' was his reply. He

wasn't certain that his own members would choose a Lutheran church.³³

I am afraid he is describing something that will more and more be the case in our synod. How is that a good thing? Is it true love that we are showing for our friends (brothers in the ministry, all the members of our congregations and members of sister WELS congregations) in the truth? Are we hearing St. John's encouragement? Perhaps we could all benefit from a journey to the cross where God showed his love among us and hear St. John say: "Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another."³⁴ "Walk in true love," he says, for your friends in the truth. In the second half of the letter he will expand the scope of his encouragement to include also the enemies of the truth.

II. Walk in true love for the enemies of the truth (vv.7-13)

7 ὅτι πολλοὶ πλάνοι ἐξῆλθον εἰς τὸν κόσμον, οἱ μὴ ὁμολογοῦντες Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐρχόμενον ἐν σαρκί· οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ πλάνος καὶ ὁ ἀντίχριστος. 8 βλέπετε ἑαυτοὺς, ἵνα μὴ ἀπολέσητε τὰ εἰργασάμεθα ἀλλὰ μισθὸν πλήρη ἀπολάβητε.

For many deceivers went out into the world—those not confessing Jesus as Christ coming in the flesh. Such a one is the deceiver and the antichrist. Watch yourselves, so that you will not lose the things which we worked for but will receive a full reward.

With ὅτι, "for," the Apostle explains the emphasis he has placed on things like "truth," "love" and "obedience" in the first part of the letter. Already by the end of the first century "many" deceivers had gone out into the world. God's people would need to live in the truth of God's Word to avoid being deceived by them. They would need true love for one another to stand shoulder to shoulder and present a united front against the enemies of their souls. They would need to be obedient; "walking according to God's commands," as they dealt with the false teachers.

As the apostles of Christ went out at his command to preach, so these deceivers ἐξῆλθον, "went out" from their leader to promulgate their errors. That leader is generally supposed to be a first century heretic named Cerinthus. John summarizes the deception of Cerinthus, which those who went out from him taught, this way: "They do not confess Jesus as Christ coming in the flesh." Cerinthus denied the incarnation and deity of Jesus Christ. Irenaeus says Cerinthus:

represented Jesus as having not been born of a virgin, but as being the son of Joseph and Mary according to the ordinary course of human generation, while he nevertheless was more righteous, prudent and wise than other men. Moreover, after his baptism, Christ descended upon him in the form of a dove from the Supreme Ruler, and that then he proclaimed the unknown Father, and performed miracles. But at last Christ departed from Jesus, and that then Jesus suffered and rose again, while Christ remained impassible, inasmuch as he was a spiritual being.³⁵

The elder says: οἱ μὴ ὁμολογοῦντες, literally, "those not confessing." We are not told that they categorically denied the incarnation, but that they did not confess it. It doesn't matter to St. John. In his first letter he made it clear that to fail to confess is the same as to deny, and to deny is to lie. He wrote: "Who is the liar? It is the man who denies that Jesus is the Christ. Such a man is the antichrist—he denies the Father and the Son. No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also."³⁶ It is noteworthy that St. John bases his judgment on these deceivers on their confession (or in this case the lack thereof.)

Lenski makes a worthwhile comment in this regard when he writes:

This is the test to apply: examine the man's confession. The Scriptures nowhere ask us to look into a man's heart. They know of no *Herzensrichterei*. God alone sees the heart; no man can see into another's heart. It is precarious to assert: 'The man's heart is alright!' when the man's confession is wrong. The Lord has given us the one safe test, the confession. Beyond this our responsibility ceases. 'What is the

man's real confession?' is for us the only question.³⁷

John's words suggest that one needs to listen not only to what a teacher says to evaluate whether he is a true prophet of God or not, but to what he doesn't say as well. This is especially important to remember these days when doctrinal statements are considered *passé* and more and more religious teachers avoid making clear confessions. Billy Graham was widely quoted recently as saying in response to a question about gay marriage: "I don't give advice. I'm going to stay off these hot-button issues."³⁸ The same issue of *Newsweek* indicated that as he slows down with age Rev. Graham just wants to preach the Gospel. (So did St. Jude, but he realized that a faithful ministry required more. He wrote: "Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints."³⁹) St John would say: "Watch yourselves when it comes to those not willing to clearly confess what God says in his Word."

Our WELS doctrinal statement says: "A Christian confession of faith is in principle always a confession to the entire Word of God. The denial, adulteration, or suppression of any word of God does not stem from faith but from unbelief... We recognize and acknowledge as Christian brethren those who profess faith in Christ as their Savior and with this profession embrace and accept his entire Word."⁴⁰

What the "deceivers" in John's day failed to confess was Ἰησοῦν Χριστὸν ἐρχόμενον ἐν σαρκί, "Jesus as Christ coming in the flesh." In his first letter St. John spoke of the same deception⁴¹, there, however, he used a perfect participle ἐληλυθότα, "having come," whereas here he uses a present participle. The present participle has led some to conclude that the deception actually had to do with Christ's second coming rather than his incarnation. It is a fact, however, that we know of no early controversy regarding whether the Father's Son would come again in the flesh, whereas John's letters clearly assert that his first coming was in the flesh. It seems better then to understand the present tense to be "altogether timeless."⁴² St. John teaches that the incarnation is not only an event in history, but is an abiding truth.

St. John has already proclaimed Jesus Christ to be the Father's Son (v.3), now he makes it clear that "Jesus did not become the Christ or the Son at his baptism, or cease to be the Christ or the Son before his death," as Cerinthus taught, but that "Jesus was 'the Christ come in the flesh.'"⁴³ John Stott says that to speak of 'Jesus Christ' as having 'come in the flesh' would be a strange 'theological anachronism' since it was not until after the incarnation that he was called 'Jesus.'⁴⁴ This being so, we should probably adopt the alternative double accusative, namely to acknowledge 'Jesus' as 'Christ come in the flesh', or 'the Christ incarnate.' This accords...with what is known of the heretics' views; that the Christ, a divine aeon, descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism, and withdrew from him before his death. John repudiates this doctrine. The truth is not that the Christ came 'into' the flesh of Jesus, but that Jesus was the Christ come 'in' the flesh.⁴⁵

Faithful shepherd that he was, St. John sounds the warning: βλέπετε ἑαυτοὺς, "Keep watching yourselves!" St. John's use of the present tense emphasizes that "eternal vigilance is the price of freedom." Jesus used the same verb in Matthew 24:4, where he warned his disciples: "Watch out that no one deceives you." Is the Apostle's warning still valid today? Do we need to keep watching? Certainly. There are still those around us who deny the deity of Christ and the reality of his incarnation. There are the Mormons and the Jehovah's Witnesses who deny those truths. Gnosticism, of which Cerinthus' error was a precursor and in which Cerinthus' error was perpetuated, has reappeared in our time.⁴⁶

But is what St. John warns against limited only to such blatant denials of the incarnation? What about the Reformed, who on the basis of the philosophical principle that "the finite is not capable of the infinite" (*finitum non est capax infiniti*), insist that the Son of God after his incarnation is not everywhere present according to his human nature, but insist that his divine nature extends beyond his human body, the so-called *extra Calvinisticum*. What about those who deny the results of Christ's incarnation, namely, God's gracious universal verdict of acquittal which Spirit-given faith does not create, but simply claims? What about the Evangelicals and their demand for faith as a decision which constitutes man's contribution to his salvation? Do not these, though they would object strenuously to the charge that they "do not confess Jesus as Christ coming in the flesh," in the final analysis do just that?

Professor Carl Lawrenz addresses that question in connection with I John 4:3, “Every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus (come in the flesh) is not of God.” He writes:

In the statement of St. John just quoted the requirement at first glance might seem to be a very narrow one, namely the confession that Jesus Christ is come into the flesh. But very obviously St. John is not satisfied with a mere confession of Christ’s incarnation, for that alone does not set forth the heart of Christian faith as St. John teaches it. Out of a very practical interest the apostle mentions only the particular point of doctrine which was being perverted by Cerinthus (a Gnostic teacher who was active around A.D. 100 at Ephesus), who with his false teaching was troubling the Christians to whom John is writing. *Yet the denial of Christ’s incarnation involves also the precious purpose, the blessed fruit, the glorious outcome of Christ’s entrance into the flesh.*⁴⁷ (Emphasis mine)

John’s analysis of anyone who does not confess Jesus as Christ come in the flesh is οὗτός ἐστιν ὁ πλάνος καὶ ὁ ἀντίχριστος, “this is the deceiver and the antichrist.” In I Jn 4:3 the Apostle provided a similar view of the relationship between false teachers and the antichrist. There he described the denial of Christ’s incarnation as τοῦτό ἐστιν τὸ τοῦ ἀντιχρίστου, “the thing” or “the characteristic of the antichrist.” John’s words here are no doubt to be understood the same way. The AAT translates: “That (the denial of Christ’s incarnation) *is the mark of the deceiver and the antichrist.*”

But aren’t appellatives like “deceivers,” and “antichrists,” a bit harsh for today’s Reformed teachers, many of whom are in many ways pious, sincere and apparently zealous for the gospel? Remember that Satan himself “masquerades as an angel of light”⁴⁸ and that’s why Jesus said of false teachers: “By their fruit (the doctrines they bring, not their smiles or outward success) you will recognize them.”⁴⁹ It may be that false teachers teach their errors out of ignorance and not out of malice, but the end result is the same—soul-destroying seeds of deception are sown. “Since Scripture enjoins that in Christ’s Church nothing but Christ’s Word is to be taught and to rule (Matt. 28:20; John 8:31,32; 17:20; I Pet. 4:11; I Tim 6:3ff.), all who teach another word are *eo ipso ἀντίχριστοι*, opponents of Christ, rebels in his kingdom.”⁵⁰

Good reason then to take to heart the elder’s warning “Watch yourselves,” and to remember what is at stake. The Apostle shows what’s on the line here: ἵνα μὴ ἀπολέσητε ἃ εἰργασάμεθα ἀλλὰ μισθὸν πλήρη ἀπολάβητε, “so that you will not lose the things which we worked for but will receive a full reward.” There is some question about the verb εἰργασάμεθα, which is a first person plural—“we worked for.” A number of manuscripts have a second person plural, “you worked for.” The former would make the verse speak of the work of the Apostles; the latter the work of the readers. George Stoeckhardt seems to be on the right track when he opts for the first plural, and explains:

The Christians are to be on their guard, lest through acceptance of false doctrine they lose what faithful teachers had bequeathed to them through diligent instruction in the truth. If they hold fast to this truth, they will receive the reward of faithfulness. If they let it go, they frustrate all the precious labor of their pastors and make themselves the greatest losers in the end. Christians should have an eye on those who do not bring the right doctrine concerning Christ. They are antichrists. Their doctrine deprives Christians of the true Christ, leads them into misbelief, and also perverts their morals.⁵¹

John is expressing the same concern Paul felt in regard to the Christians in Galatia. He wrote: “I fear for you, that somehow I have wasted my efforts on you.”⁵²

9 πᾶς ὁ προάγων καὶ μὴ μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ τοῦ Χριστοῦ θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει· ὁ μένων ἐν τῇ διδαχῇ, οὗτος καὶ τὸν πατέρα καὶ τὸν υἱὸν ἔχει.

Anyone who “advances” and does not continue in Christ’s teaching does not have God. Whoever remains in what he taught has both the Father and the Son.

Is it possible that some might think St. John has overblown the threat posed by the false teachers? Were some questioning whether false teachers are really deceivers and antichrists, and whether their deceptions could

put a Christian's eternal reward in jeopardy? If so, the Apostle explains the serious threat posed by those who do not confess the full reality of Christ's incarnation; "its precious purpose, blessed fruit, and glorious outcome." He refers to the false teachers as those who *προάγων*, "are advancing," or "running ahead." "John is almost certainly borrowing from the vocabulary of the heretics. They claimed to have 'go ahead' views, a superior *gnosis*, which had enabled them to advance beyond the rudiments of the faith in which the common herd were content to 'continue.'"⁵³

Paul E. Kretzmann reminds us that these progressive false teachers are still with us. He writes:

The false teachers of Asia Minor were fond of boasting that they alone were progressive, advanced thinkers; they alone were making the Gospel fit new situations, just as the false prophets of our day are always advertising, with a pitying side glance at the poor benighted Bible Christians that still cling to its doctrines of sin and grace. The old teaching of Christ, of salvation through his blood, had been set aside by them as not agreeing with the demands of an enlightened people.⁵⁴

John wants God's people and their preachers to know that to "advance" beyond Christ is "not progress but apostasy."⁵⁵

This is not to condemn all progress on the part of Christians. St. Paul encouraged a young co-worker named Timothy to devote himself to preaching and teaching and to the public reading of Scripture. Then he added this encouragement: "Be diligent in these matters; give yourself wholly to them, so that everyone may see your *progress*."⁵⁶ Forbidden is "progress" beyond Christ's teaching, not progress in understanding and applying it. Which of us will claim to have finished that journey, to say nothing of being ready to advance beyond it?

The question is asked whether *τοῦ Χριστοῦ*, is an objective genitive, the doctrine, or what was taught "concerning Christ," or a subjective genitive, the doctrine "Christ taught." While either would make sense, in the New Testament when *διδασχὴ* is used with a genitive of the person it is invariably a subjective genitive,⁵⁷ the doctrine Christ (or his apostles) taught and which is recorded in the Bible. Here is the answer to anyone who supposes we have unfairly applied the description of the false teachers in v.7 to the heterodox in our day. St. John, himself, now expands his warning to include every apostasy from the doctrine of Christ, every deviation from the truth of God as laid down in the Bible. This includes "the great truths taught by Christ and his apostles, of his divinity, incarnation, and atonement; of justification by faith in him, regeneration by the Spirit of God, and the necessity of perseverance in holiness in order to obtain salvation."⁵⁸

Our WELS doctrinal statement agrees. It says:

Yet there is nothing to indicate that the withholding of fellowship to which St. John exhorts is to be restricted to the type of errorist of whom he happened to have a special occasion to speak. The reason adduced for withholding such fellowship, "For he that biddeth him Godspeed is partaker of his evil deeds," would apply equally well to any persistent errorist. Cf. I Timothy 5:22.^{59 60}

The elder's verdict on a teacher who denies the doctrine of Christ is brief and to the point: *θεὸν οὐκ ἔχει*, "God he does not have." He denies the true God, and although he may shout ever so loudly, "I know him!" he deludes himself and misleads others. It's interesting that John maintains that only by continuing in the teaching, the doctrine, of Christ can anyone have God; that is, knowledge of God, and a relationship with or fellowship with God. Much is said these days about doctrine; mostly contemptuous and condescending.⁶¹ Preachers talk up relationships with God and talk down propositions, that is, doctrine. St. John refuses to trade doctrine for relationships; instead he insists that the only way to "have God" is by way of pure doctrine, "continuing in the teaching of Christ." St. Paul said the same to Timothy: "Watch your life and doctrine closely. Persevere in them, because if you do you will save both yourself and your hearers."⁶²

Fans of Hillary Clinton used to talk about how by electing her husband, America got two for the price of one. St. John says something similar about those who continue in Christ's teaching. Whereas those who advance beyond Christ's teaching leave God behind and end up without God at all, those who continue in his teaching have "both the Father and the Son." Ever so subtly, but surely with an eye on the deceivers, St. John reaffirms the Deity of Christ, for those who continue in his teaching have God—God the Father, and Jesus

Christ, the Father's Son (v.3).

But again the question comes to mind: Isn't John overdoing it a little here when he says these false teachers don't have God? And even if what he says is true, isn't it a bit of a stretch to apply the conclusion he reaches in II John to Reformed teachers in our day since he is dealing with the doctrine being brought by the disciples of Cerinthus—the denial of Christ's incarnation? Franz Pieper answers:

The question has often been discussed whether or not Reformed Christology, inasmuch as it opposes Lutheran Christology, injures the Christian faith...The question may be answered thus: In so far as Reformed theology, in its effort to disprove Lutheran Christology, applies the principle that the finite is not capable of the infinite, it inevitably denies the incarnation of the Son of God and Christ's vicarious atonement, and so destroys the foundation of the Christian faith.⁶³

Adolf Hoenecke agrees. He writes that the personal union of the divine and human natures in Christ "is not a respective or relative union, where a union exists at the same time with a relatively simultaneous separation, as, e.g., between spouses, friends and members of a church...That was the position of the *Gnostics and is today of Reformed Christology*."⁶⁴ (Emphasis mine)

So then you have to be WELS to "have God," and get to heaven. Not true. Orthodox theologians have always allowed for what is known as the "felicitous" or "happy inconsistency." Pieper refers to this when having stated that traditional Reformed Christology vitiates both Christ's incarnation and the vicarious atonement, he adds: "But in so far as Reformed theology is inconsistent and ignores its basic error that the human nature is not capable of divinity, and especially, inasmuch as it maintains, over against Socinianism, the incarnation of the Son of God and the vicarious satisfaction of Christ as possessing infinite value, it returns to the Christian faith."⁶⁵

It is with joy that we acknowledge the happy inconsistency that God has true children in false churches; true believers who are included in the "Holy Christian Church" we confess in the Creed. For all the miles on the old canard that claims "The WELS teaches that only WELS members are going to heaven," I can honestly say I have never heard a WELS teacher or preacher say that and would correct anyone who did. "The Lord knows those who are his,"⁶⁶ even in false churches. That being said we hasten to add that we are unable to practice church fellowship with those we may think and hope are happily inconsistent and believe better than they confess. It is only the basis of what a person confesses with his words and his visible church membership that one can practice church fellowship. Before we can deal with someone as a "weaker" brother, we have to be able to determine that we are dealing with a "brother," on the basis of his confession. To do otherwise; to ignore the confession of lips and life and attempt to judge the faith that's hidden in person's heart would be the height of arrogance. "Man looks at the outward appearance;" the Lord alone "looks at the heart."⁶⁷

With verses 7 and 8 John provided his readers with the means to identify false teachers. The test they are to apply is this: do they confess "Jesus as Christ coming in the flesh?" In verse 9 St. John warned against progressing beyond Christ's teaching and showed the blessings of continuing in the doctrine of Christ. Next he gives instructions about how to deal with false teachers.

10 εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρὸς ὑμᾶς καὶ ταύτην τὴν διδαχὴν οὐ φέρει, μὴ λαμβάνετε αὐτὸν εἰς οἰκίαν καὶ χαίρειν αὐτῷ μὴ λέγετε·

If one comes to you and doesn't bring this teaching, do not receive him into the house and do not say to him, "Greetings."

The elder, with a view to the ravenous wolves that threaten his flock, has already urged the sheep to "keep watching yourselves" (v.8). Now he explains just how careful God's people need to be when it comes to false teachers and their false teachings. He says: εἴ τις ἔρχεται πρὸς ὑμᾶς, "If anyone comes to you." Lenski calls this "the condition of reality."⁶⁸ And, of course, it is a reality. If false prophets are wolves, the sheep shouldn't be surprised to find them in their neighborhood. St. John suggests that the false teachers will come "to you." Here it will be helpful to know something of the historical setting in which St. John wrote. There was, of course,

in the first century, no synod to carry on mission work. Individual congregations and members within those congregations supported the missionaries of that day.

St. John's third letter gives us some insight into how this worked in real life. III John is apparently a "letter of introduction" carried by a traveling faithful missionary named Demetrius who is coming to Gaius. John urges Gaius, who has a history of providing food and lodging to traveling missionaries (III John 5,6a), to continue his former kindness by welcoming Demetrius (vv.6b,7). As he welcomes faithful teachers like Demetrius and provides them with food and lodging, he is supporting their work (v.8). It is in this context that St. John writes to God's faithful people and warns them: *μὴ λαμβάνετε αὐτὸν εἰς οἰκίαν*, "Do not receive him into the house."

Clearly St. John, the Apostle of true love, is not talking about simple acts of hospitality on the part of God's people. The implication is that the one who comes is a traveling religious teacher who's looking for room and board; he's looking to be supplied with a base for his operations and support for his work. St. John says that in the case of a false teacher such a display of support must be denied. "Do not receive him into the house." It may be worth noting that St. John does not use the pronoun "your," which is supplied in most of our translations. He simply says: "Don't receive him into the house." Which house? Is he talking about the homes of individual members of the congregation? Or is he speaking in his own historical setting, the time before church buildings as we know them existed, and churches met in private homes?⁶⁹ If we are correct that the letter before us is addressed to a Christian congregation and not to a Christian woman named Cyria, then the assumption would be that John is not forbidding "private hospitality...so much as an official welcome into the congregation, with the opportunity this would afford to the false teacher to propagate his errors."⁷⁰

But his language is general enough, perhaps deliberately so, to also apply to individual members, such as Gaius, the man who is commended in III John for his support of faithful preachers of God's Word. We repeat: John is not forbidding God's people to show hospitality and common courtesy to all people even false teachers. His words here do not contradict St. Paul's encouragement: "Practice hospitality."⁷¹ Lenski explains the distinction between common courtesy and support for false teachers:

To what extent do John's words affect men who are not proselyters? To none. As occasion offers, we do any man a kindness. We do not even ask what he believes or whether he has a religious belief at all. I may take a Jew, a Mohammedan, a heathen, a tramp, a beggar under my roof; I may bid the time of day to any and to all men. But a notorious proselyting errorist? Do you as a true believer want even the least fellowship with his works? If he, because of your even kindly wishing him well, succeeds in snaring even one humble Christian, can you answer to God for your kindly wish?⁷²

Not even a kindly wish is to be offered to a false prophet? That's right, according to the Apostle. He says: "Do not...welcome him" (NIV). "Welcome him," is literally, "Say 'Greetings' to him." The Greek word for "greetings" here is *χαίρειν*, which comes from a root meaning "to rejoice, to be glad." *χαίρειν* was used as a cordial address of welcome or farewell, something like "I am glad to see you" or "I wish you well."⁷³ Once again, keep in mind that St. John is not forbidding Christians to "bid the time of day to any and to all men," but is speaking in the context of church fellowship. Our WELS statement on fellowship emphasizes this when it says: "When St. John warns against receiving such a man into one's house and of bidding him Godspeed, he does not have an ordinary reception and a civil greeting in mind, such as we properly accord to all men, but a reception and greeting which would be understood as an acknowledgement of him as a Christian brother, as an expression of church fellowship."⁷⁴

At this point, some may be wondering what all this has to do with us, WELS pastors, teachers and laypeople, who have given up a Labor Day weekend to study II John. The answer is that there is a practice which is becoming more and more common in our synod which appears in some cases at least to be at odds with the words and warning of II John. That is the practice of inviting non-WELS speakers to address WELS gatherings. The most prominent example, perhaps, is the "Church and Change" group which will feature a Methodist speaker by the name of Leonard Sweet at its next event. There have been others. The Charis Institute of Wisconsin Lutheran College regularly invites non-WELS speakers to its events. Christian Life Resources and

the National Conference on Worship, Music and the Arts among others have featured non-WELS speakers at their events. The practice of inviting non-WELS speakers to events sponsored by WELS groups has become rather commonplace by now in our synod.

And what does that have to do with II John? The answer is that some of these speakers are regulars on the religious lecture circuit. That lecture circuit is made up of men and women of various denominations who have achieved celebrity status as a result of books they've authored; ministries they've established; or churches they've grown. These ecclesiastical celebrities travel around sharing the secrets of their success at conferences and workshops. This would seem to be strikingly similar to the situation John addresses in his second and third letters with the itinerant religious teachers of his day. While many on the lecture circuit no doubt still have their day jobs, as pastors or teachers or authors, there can be no doubt that the fees they collect for their appearances supplement their regular income and serve to support them and their ministries. There can also be no doubt that such invitations provide false teachers with a platform, exposure and may we say validation of their erroneous views. Is this consistent with St. John's instructions that false teachers not be given aid and support?

Lenski makes a striking observation here. He says: "The state locks up murderers, thieves, criminals as a matter of protection. Is the church to aid and abet spiritual murderers and thieves? Not for one moment, all maudlin sentiment in the state and in the church to the contrary notwithstanding."⁷⁵ If St. John is right, and false teachers of the stripe that deny the truth and full implications of Christ's incarnation do not have God, then it seems that some of the very teachers who are being invited to speak at WELS gatherings do not have God, or do so only by a happy inconsistency. They appear to be more in need of our admonition than our admiration; our sympathy rather than our support; our rebuke rather than our rapt attention.

Does St. John anticipate someone saying, with Ronald Reagan a few years ago: "There you go again?" Does he think someone might still think he's overstating the threat, and getting too extreme with his instructions? With verse 11, he answers those criticisms.

11 ὁ λέγων γὰρ αὐτῷ χαίρειν κοινωνεῖ τοῖς ἔργοις αὐτοῦ τοῖς πονηροῖς.

The one who says to him, "Greetings," shares in his wicked works.

Why must God's people refuse to welcome false prophets in such a way as to support them in their work? Because it is a *πονηροῖς*, "wicked" work. The Scriptures speak of false teachings in terms of yeast, a little bit of which "works through the whole batch of dough,"⁷⁶ and gangrene,⁷⁷ which spreads like poison throughout the whole body. Scripture says false teaching "contaminates body and spirit."⁷⁸ Those who spread false teaching are engaged in a wicked work. "Yes," declares the LORD, "I am against the prophets who wag their own tongues and yet declare, 'The LORD declares.'"⁷⁹ But the Lord is not only against the false prophets, according to the elder, he is also against those who welcome them and provide them with a base for their nefarious work. Such a person "shares," *κοινωνεῖ*, "is a partaker" (KJV) of his wicked work.

60 years ago C. August Hardt, in the *Concordia Theological Monthly* elaborated on the "wickedness" of the wicked work done by those who support false teachers. He wrote:

If we reflect for a minute we see the serious implications of the words of John. He who has fellowship with an errorist has a share in his evil deeds in more ways than one. *First*, he sins against the *Lord and His Word*; for he is indifferent to the truth, which much be supreme. The Lord has said: 'To this man will I look, even to him that is poor and of a contrite spirit and trembleth at My Word.' And Jesus declares: 'If ye continue in my Word, then are ye my disciples indeed.' *Secondly*, he sins against the *Church*, for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making them indifferent. In the *third place*, he sins against the *false teachers* by strengthening them in their conviction that they possess the truth, rather than testifying and 'in meekness instructing those that oppose themselves, if God peradventure will give them repentance to the acknowledging of the truth.' And *finally*, he sins against *his own soul*, because he exposes himself to the corrupting influence of error, which is never static, but spreads 'and will eat as doth a canker.'⁸⁰

It may be worthwhile to give Pastor Hardt's words a bit more thought. There is a tendency to downplay the significance of the sin the person who has fellowship with an errorist commits against his own soul. Confronted with the danger some will respond that they are strong enough in faith so they have nothing to worry about. But that danger has to be considered along with the sin against the Lord and his Word. In other words, it isn't merely a matter of being stronger than the false teacher or false teaching; it is a question of being stronger than the Lord. In I Corinthians 10 where Paul speaks of the danger of joining the heathen in their idol feasts, it is as though he expects some to give the brush-off to his warning, "So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall."⁸¹ That's why later he asks those who may wish to press the issue: "Are we trying to arouse the Lord's jealousy? Are we stronger than *he*?"⁸² It isn't just a matter of being strong enough to handle the false teacher or false teaching, it's a matter of being stronger than a jealous God—which one of us is?

Hardt also states that the one who fellowships with false teachers sins against the Church, "for he gives offense to its members by leading them to believe that one doctrine is as good as another, thus making them indifferent." Even if II John has nothing to say in regard to the practice of inviting false teachers to address WELS groups (an assertion I would challenge), it would seem that this concern alone would make the organizers of these gatherings stop in their tracks. It wasn't that long ago that that our Synod's official magazine published the following:

St. Paul urges Christians not to do what may be perfectly innocent if others might be misled by that action (Romans 14; I Corinthians 8 and 10). When our actions may be misconstrued by other ('weak') Christians in such a way that they are led to sin or doubt, we have no right to exercise our 'right.' When Christianity or the church may be slandered by hypocrisy hunters who misinterpret our actions, then it's wrong to insist on 'rights'....Christian love means yielding what may be right for oneself when it may wrong others.⁸³

Hardt finally mentions sinning against the false teacher. 50 years ago the essay delivered to the 33rd Convention of the Wisconsin Synod was based on I Corinthians 9:22,23, and was entitled "Being Made All Things To All Men." In it the essayist warned against using Paul's words in those verses as camouflage for unionistic practice and asked:

Don't you see what happens when you join in a unionistic service? Among men so fed on unionistic fare you are creating the general reaction: 'These Lutherans aren't so narrow any more. They're getting more liberal. They're not condemning us any more. We must all be alike, with, perhaps, a few minor differences.' It will not save you to bring a forthright testimony for Christ then and there. You have already undermined, weakened, and blunted your testimony. What is more, you have done that to your subsequent testimony. Don't you recall that this Paul to whom you appeal exhorts you and us to be sober and circumspect. That is, carefully and prayerfully to appraise all that is involved in any step that we take? You say you do not want to be remiss in your Gospel-stewardship by failing to seize any opportunity to bear witness for Christ? You wish to be resourceful and aggressive like Paul? That's good. But will you insist on pursuing a course that works counter to the very cause you wish and profess to serve, bringing the witness for Christ?⁸⁴

Granted that the essayist's warning is made in the context of "joining in a unionistic service," but all he says surely applies just as well to sitting at the feet of false teachers and lending support to their cause.

How does this apply to the present question of inviting speakers who are outside of our fellowship to speak to WELS assemblies? On the one hand we have not taken the position that such an invitation would be wrong in every instance. In the *Church Fellowship* volume of the "People's Bible Teachings" series the author, Professor John Brug, makes the following observation:

Various WELS organizations or schools may invite lecturers from outside our fellowship to present information to their group. This does not involve fellowship *if no worship or religious instruction is involved* (emphasis mine), but only the giving of information. In situations that might create unclarity,

such as a series of public lectures presented at a seminary or college of our fellowship, it is wise to make a specific announcement that these lectures are being presented outside the framework of fellowship.⁸⁵

One could envision Christian Life Resources inviting someone in to speak on the science involved with embryonic stem cell research or our Seminary inviting a linguist to speak on the history of the pointing of the text of the Hebrew Old Testament. Such events, conducted “outside the framework of fellowship,”⁸⁶ may not present a problem.

On the other hand, the same volume contains the following under the heading: *Financial Support*. The author writes there:

Scripture clearly states that anyone providing financial support to a teacher of religion is expressing fellowship with him or her. This is true whether this teacher is one’s own pastor or someone whose work is being done elsewhere. The Philippians were partners in Paul’s work through the financial support that they sent to him (Philippians 1:5; 4:15). On the other hand, those who support or encourage false teachers are partners in their evil deeds (II John 11).⁸⁷

It would appear that there is a difference between inviting someone who is outstanding in a particular secular field to speak on his secular specialty and inviting someone who is not only a “teacher of religion,” but on the basis of his or her confession would have to be labeled a false religious teacher, to speak at a WELS gathering. An important question would arise in such a case: Is not the fee paid and/or the accommodations and the exposure such an invitation provides for the false teacher and his or her false teachings in fact providing support for the false teacher?

At the risk of having someone ask what business a seed picker from South Dakota has issuing a fellowship *fatwa*, I will offer some thoughts in response to that question. On the basis of the Apostle’s words in II John and the position taken by Professor Brug in his volume on *Church Fellowship*, the answer is clearly yes. That answer is given realizing that there are WELS men who have participated in free conferences sponsored by LCMS and even ELCA groups and received compensation for their time and travel, and that WELS groups have invited LCMS and ELCA representatives to speak at free conferences and compensated them for their time and travel. Is that any different from inviting someone outside of our fellowship from the religious lecture circuit to give advice on how to do the Lord’s work more successfully? I would say yes. Free conferences, which are held to define differences and clarify positions to determine if there is any hope of working toward true unity with others, seem to harmonize well with St. Paul’s words: “We cannot do anything against the truth, but only for the truth.”⁸⁸

On the other hand, to invite a false teacher in to explain how our culture is changing and how we can make the gospel and our churches more relevant in view of those changes; to offer him publicity, a platform and exposure seems to be completely at odds with all St. John has said. It’s difficult to envision a scenario that could possibly be any closer to identical to the situation addressed in II John—God’s people, the truth, itinerant false teachers, their errors, comfort and support, etc. St. John’s counsel to the Christians of his day could hardly be clearer. It boils down to St. Paul’s “keep away from them,”⁸⁹ and “have nothing to do with them.”⁹⁰ Neither John’s words nor Paul’s can possibly mean, “Invite them in, promote their appearance, provide them with a platform, validate their views, hand them a check and wish them well when they leave.”

But what if the false teacher happens to have information that may be useful? Is it possible to extend the invitation and stipulate that we want only the useful information presented and no harmful theology? Think of what we have studied in II John. Is it possible to imagine that the elder would have made a distinction between the blasphemous teachings regarding Christ’s incarnation that the false teachers were bringing and other useful information they might have had? They were, after all, the *avant-garde* of what in its full-blown form became known as Gnosticism (from the Greek word for knowledge). They surely had plenty of information, but it’s doubtful that St. John would have waived his warning on that account. Instead he might have pointed out that it was the promise of knowledge that Satan first used to beguile man: “You will be like God, *knowing* good and evil.”⁹¹ And he surely would have sided with St. Paul who had to deal with Christians who worried that they were missing out on some needed information because they stuck with the simple message of Christ. Paul

reassured them that in Christ “in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge,”⁹² they had all the information they needed. And he might have issued a warning similar to St. Paul’s: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.”⁹³

If there are some who have no taste for what St. John serves up in this second letter; perhaps it is because the analysis of a modern author is correct. Zane Hodges writes:

To some modern minds these instructions seem unduly rigid and harsh. A great part of the problem, however, lies in the modern inclination to be highly tolerant of religious differences. One must frankly face the fact that the New Testament writers did not share this spirit of toleration. Their commitment to the truth and their consciousness of the dangers of religious error called forth many stern denunciations of false teachers. Not surprisingly, this modern age, having a diminishing sense of the dangers of heresy, has lost its convictions about the truth.⁹⁴

There are those who have perceived a tension between St. John’s harsh denunciation of false teachers, his prescribed method of dealing with them, and his emphasis on love. One writer comments this way on John’s instructions about refusing to give aid and comfort to a false teacher:

This counsel (in v.11) recalls the story of John’s behavior to Cerinthus and it was cited by Irenaeus as inculcating intolerance of heretics. (*The author is referring to a reported incident in which St. John, seeing Cerinthus in a public bathhouse, cried out: “Let us flee lest the building fall, since Cerinthus, the foe of the Truth is within it!”*) If so it is certainly an unchristian counsel, contrary to the spirit and teaching of our Lord...Heretics are our fellow creatures; Jesus died for them also, and our office is to win them. If we close our doors and our hearts against them, we lose the opportunity of winning them and harden them in their opposition.⁹⁵

And now it is clear why St. John stated and restated at the outset of the letter that true love does not invent its own way, but walks in God’s commands. Professor Brug writes:

In I Timothy 1, immediately after telling Timothy to oppose false teachers, Paul says, ‘The goal of this command is love, which comes from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith’ (verse 5). We dare not lose sight of the reason that we practice the biblical principles of church fellowship: The goal of this command is love—love for errorists, love for their victims, love for anyone who is threatened by false teachings, and love for God and his truth...To be silent in the presence of error, which sweeps people away to hell, makes us as guilty—no, more guilty—as the person who stands silently by and watches a fire burn up a house and its sleeping inhabitants. Love requires me to cry out; love requires me to warn. To be silent because I don’t want to offend anyone, because I don’t want to be labeled intolerant, because I love the praise of men more than the praise of God—this is not love; this is selfishness.⁹⁶

St. John didn’t sense any conflict between the instructions he gave regarding treatment of false teachers and the love he inculcated on the part of God’s people for each other and for false teachers, and so he closes his letter not with a heavy heart and a sense of loss, but with optimism and hope.

12 Πολλὰ ἔχων ὑμῖν γράφειν οὐκ ἐβουλήθην διὰ χάρτου καὶ μέλανος, ἀλλὰ ἐλπίζω γενέσθαι πρὸς ὑμᾶς καὶ στόμα πρὸς στόμα λαλήσαι, ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν πεπληρωμένη ᾖ. 13 Ἀσπάζεται σε τὰ τέκνα τῆς ἀδελφῆς σου τῆς ἐκλεκτῆς.

Although I have much to write to you, I don’t want to use paper and ink. Instead, I hope to come to you and speak face to face so that our joy may be complete. The children of your elect sister send you greetings.

An “oldie” right to the end. We thank God that the Apostle did use *χάρτου καὶ μέλανος*, literally, “papyrus and what is black,” at least enough to write this brief epistle which would have fit on a single sheet of papyrus of standard size. (The preservation of such a small document is no doubt a testimony to its inspiration

and the importance of its message in the eyes of the Holy Spirit.) But we note that even with the latest technology —paper and ink—right there for the Apostle to use, he uses it sparingly and makes clear that his preference is *στόμα πρὸς στόμα λαλῆσαι*, literally “mouth to mouth to speak.”

The result of such a face to face meeting would be in the Apostle’s words: *ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἡμῶν πεπληρωμένη ᾖ*, “that our joy may be complete.” Some have found it incongruous for St. John to speak of joy, and not just joy but complete joy, in a letter which seems to deal so harshly with false teachers, and contains such stern instructions for dealing with them. If John’s joy is inconsistent with his instructions he is at least in good company. St. Paul didn’t feel it was inconsistent to write in consecutive verses of Philippians: “Finally, my brothers, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you. Watch out for those dogs, those men who do evil, those mutilators of the flesh.”⁹⁷ Perhaps St. John’s joy is a reminder that for those born of God “his commands are not burdensome.”⁹⁸ Maybe his joy tells us that all worldly sentimentality aside, what he had written and what he would say when face to face about how to walk in love for friends in the truth and how to walk in love for the enemies of the truth was true love, after all.

We close with an encouraging word from a pamphlet published by our synod’s Conference of Presidents more than 50 years ago entitled “Cooperation in Externals:”

Then let us do the work the Lord has assigned us, not disheartened because we cannot cooperate with those who do not stand together with us in doctrine and practice, but with a good will and in quiet confidence, because we shall find much strength through being able to work with those who are of one mind and heart with us, and above all because he who has exhorted us to ‘be...steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord,’ promises that our labor will not be in vain in him (I Corinthians 15:58).⁹⁹

Soli Deo Gloria!

Endnotes

¹ Mt 22:37-39.

² Ro 13:10.

³ Note, for example, how all three letters speak of “walking” (I Jn 2:6; II Jn 6; III Jn 3), in “love” (I Jn 4:8; II Jn 6; III Jn 6) and in “truth” (I Jn 1:6; II Jn 4; III Jn 4). Note also that in all three letters John provides information about how to identify false prophets and false teaching (I Jn 4:2,3; II Jn 7; III Jn 11).

⁴ For example, the shift from singular pronouns in vv.1-5 to plurals beginning at v.8, and the assertion in v.5 that it was God’s will from the beginning for the Apostle and Cyria to “love one another.”

⁵ See Mk 10:35-37 where John and his brother James asked for places of honor for themselves.

⁶ See Lk 9:51-54 where James and John are ready to call down fire on a Samaritan village.

⁷ I Jn 3:16.

⁸ Note, for example, Jn 8:31,32: “If you hold to my teaching...you will know the truth,” Jn 14:6: “I am the way, the truth and the life,” and Jn 17:17: “Sanctify them by the truth, your word is truth.”

⁹ See III Jn 2: “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well.”

¹⁰ John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John*, p.207.

¹¹ I Co 1:11.

¹² As in III Jn 3.

¹³ I Jn 3:23.

¹⁴ Dr. George Stoeckhardt, *Lectures on the Three Letters of John*, p.84.

¹⁵ E. C. Fredrich, *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, Volume 78, Number 1, p.5

- ¹⁶ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of Peter, John, Jude*, p.549.
- ¹⁷ III Jn 9.
- ¹⁸ I Jn 2:7,8.
- ¹⁹ Stoeckhardt, *op. cit.*, p.19.
- ²⁰ La 3:22,23.
- ²¹ I Jn 5:3.
- ²² I Jn 3:18.
- ²³ Forrest Bivens, *Current Issues Concerning Church Fellowship, Part II*, WLQ, Vol. 95, Num. 1, p.34.
- ²⁴ Stoeckhardt, *op.cit.*, p.86.
- ²⁵ We are aware that the demonstratives , at the beginning of the sentence, and , and the end of the sentence are ambiguous and would allow the passage to be rendered: “This is the commandment, That, as ye have heard from the beginning, ye should walk in it,” as did the KJV. The translation above, however, is based on and does justice to the parallelism existing between the two parts of the verse.
- ²⁶ Lenski, p.562.
- ²⁷ Ga 6:10.
- ²⁸ John H. C. Fritz, *Pastoral Theology*, p.324.
- ²⁹ Armin Schuetze & Irwin Habeck, *The Shepherd Under Christ*, p.63.
- ³⁰ “I have become all things to all men so that by all possible means I might save some. I do all this for the sake of the gospel, that I may share in its blessings.”
- ³¹ I Co 8:13.
- ³² I Co 10:23,24.
- ³³ Klemet Preus, *The Fire and the Staff*, p.344.
- ³⁴ I Jn 4:11.
- ³⁵ *Against Heresies*, 1.26.1.
- ³⁶ I Jn 2:22,23.
- ³⁷ Lenski, *op. cit.*, p.487.
- ³⁸ *Newsweek*, June 27, 2005, p.23.
- ³⁹ Jude 3.
- ⁴⁰ *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, “Church Fellowship,” p.52.
- ⁴¹ “This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God” (I Jn 4:2).
- ⁴² Stott, *op.cit.*, p.212.
- ⁴³ *Ibid*, p.212.
- ⁴⁴ While it would be a “strange” theological anachronism, it is not impossible or unheard of. Franz Pieper points out on the basis of Jn 6:62, “The Son of Man was in heaven,” that the incarnate Son of God may be the subject also when the predicate speaks of the divine nature. *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. II, p.287. That being said, Stott’s view agrees well with the context in which John is writing.
- ⁴⁵ Stott, *op. cit.*, p.159.
- ⁴⁶ In, for example, Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code* and Elaine Pagels’, *The Gnostic Gospels*.
- ⁴⁷ Carl Lawrenz, “The Scriptural Principles Concerning Church Fellowship” printed in *Our Great Heritage* edited by Lyle Lange, p.457.
- ⁴⁸ II Co 11:14.
- ⁴⁹ Mt 7:16.
- ⁵⁰ Francis Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics*, Vol. III, p.462.
- ⁵¹ Stoeckhardt, *op. cit.*, p.87.
- ⁵² Ga 4:11.
- ⁵³ Stott, *op. cit.*, p.213.

- ⁵⁴ Paul E. Kretzmann, *Popular Commentary of the Bible, New Testament, Vol. II*, p.581.
- ⁵⁵ Stott, *op. cit.*, p.214.
- ⁵⁶ I Ti 4:15.
- ⁵⁷ Compare, Mt 16:12, “the doctrine of the scribes and Pharisees;” Rev 2:14, “the doctrine of Balaam;” and Rev 2:15, “the doctrine of the Nicolaitans.”
- ⁵⁸ John Theodore Mueller, *Concordia Bible with Notes*, p.1457.
- ⁵⁹ “Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, and do not share in the sins of others. Keep yourself pure.”
- ⁶⁰ Doctrinal Statements of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod 1970, p.46.
- ⁶¹ For example: “God didn’t send us propositions and statements; he sent us a Savior. We are now in a relationship society.” Leonard Sweet, from a summary of his Keynote Address at “AEC 2002,” located online at www.newlifeministries.org.
- ⁶² I Ti 4:16.
- ⁶³ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II*, p.271.
- ⁶⁴ Adolf Hoenecke, *Evangelical Lutheran Dogmatics, Vol. III*, p.76.
- ⁶⁵ Pieper, *Christian Dogmatics, Vol. II*, p.271.
- ⁶⁶ II Ti 2:19.
- ⁶⁷ I Sa 16:7.
- ⁶⁸ Lenski, *op. cit.*, p.569.
- ⁶⁹ See Ro 16:5; I Co 16:19; Col 4:15 and Phm 2.
- ⁷⁰ Stott, *op. cit.*, p.216.
- ⁷¹ Ro 13:12.
- ⁷² Lenski, *op. cit.*, p.571.
- ⁷³ See Acts 15:23, “With them they sent the following letter: The apostles and elders, your brothers, To the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia: Greetings.” Also Acts 23:26, “Claudias Lysias, To His Excellency, Governor Felix: Greetings.” And Jas 1:1, “James a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes scattered among the nations: Greetings.”
- ⁷⁴ *Doctrinal Statements of the WELS*, 1970, “Church Fellowship,” p.46.
- ⁷⁵ Lenski, p. 571.
- ⁷⁶ Ga 5:9.
- ⁷⁷ II Ti 2:17.
- ⁷⁸ II Co 7:1.
- ⁷⁹ Jer 23:32.
- ⁸⁰ C. August Hardt, *Christian Fellowship*, Concordia Theological Monthly, Volume XVI, p.520.
- ⁸¹ I Co 10:12.
- ⁸² I Co 10:22.
- ⁸³ Paul Kelm, *The Northwestern Lutheran*, Vol. 73, No. 17, October 1, 1986, p.333.
- ⁸⁴ Werner Franzmann, *Quartalschrift (Theological Quarterly)*, October 1957, p.245.
- ⁸⁵ John F. Brug, *Church Fellowship: Working Together for the Truth*, p.156.
- ⁸⁶ The WELS COP in 2003 produced a document which elaborates on the phrase “outside the framework of fellowship” this way:
1. It is possible for presentations and discussions about secular and/or religious matters which take place in schools, churches, conferences, commissions and parasynodical organizations of our fellowship, or other similar events to occur outside the framework of fellowship.
 2. When speakers and presenters are not of our fellowship they MUST conduct their presentation outside the framework of fellowship:
 - a) that means that they must not lead worship: including prayer, confession, song and sacrament;
 - b) preliminary cautions must be made in the advertisements and the introduction of the presenter if that individual draws conclusions on the basis of Bible truths;
 - c) since fellowship includes joint church work, outside speakers must not participate with their audience in church activities; e.g., canvassing, counseling, Bible studies, etc.
 3. We should confer with our brothers in ministry and be sensitive to the feelings and concerns of our constituency in

the selection of such speakers and the way in which their presence is publicized. Since the choice of certain speakers may cause offense or unrest among our constituents, it would always be advisable to seek the counsel of a wider spectrum of the brotherhood, including the leadership of the district in which the event will take place.

4. Although scheduling of celebrities may be of some value in the information they can share with and even showing their agreement with our position, we should be careful not to rely upon their endorsement to give credibility to our cause.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.112.

⁸⁸ II Co 13:8.

⁸⁹ Ro 16:17.

⁹⁰ Tit 3:10.

⁹¹ Ge 3:5.

⁹² Col 2:3.

⁹³ Col 2:8.

⁹⁴ Zane C. Hodges, *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, p. 909.

⁹⁵ David Smith, *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, p.203.

⁹⁶ Brug, *op. cit.*, pp.159,160.

⁹⁷ Php 3:1,2.

⁹⁸ I Jn 5:3.

⁹⁹ *Essays in Church Fellowship*, Curtis Jahn, Editor, p.385.

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