

Avoiding false teaching with the help of Christmas

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Brian R. Wipf

Is it difficult to keep Christ at the center of Christmas? The season just has a way of keeping us busy and distracted, doesn't it? Shopping. Christmas parties. Making those kids concerts. Decorating. Travel schedules. All of these good and fun activities of the Christmas season have a way of nudging Christ more and more from our consciousness. We don't fix this by scolding people when they type Xmas in an email, do you know what I mean? Like, boycotting Starbucks for saying Happy Holidays really isn't going to fix this problem. Let's not point the finger like the problem is out there; let's always remember to point the thumb.

What's the danger of forgetting the truth about Christmas? How bad is it? What might happen if we ignore the true meaning of Christmas? That's what I want to explore with you this morning and I want to do that by reading an often neglected letter, 2 John (READ vs. 1-13).

Let's start by making some general observations. First of all, the elder is writing this letter to the elect lady and her children. Let's not spent too much time here; while he doesn't identify himself, it's believed this elder is the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee. Most scholars believe that the elect lady is not a particular person, but a reference to a church. Sometimes we see this in the scriptures; something gets personified. In Prov. 9, Wisdom is referred to as a person. I think the same thing is happening here. John, who tends to write with a lot of visual images (just read his Gospel and the Revelation as good examples) is doing that here. He's calling a church he cares for and even is responsible of the elect lady and her children. The best evidence that this is a reference to a church and not a person and her children is that throughout this short letter John alternates pronouns from singular to plural. So, for example, in vs 5 when he says, "not as though I were writing you a new commandment" that's a singular you. But in the very next verse (vs. 6) when he says, "just as you heard" and "you should walk in" he uses the plural you... like you'all. Every now and then when I'm talking with someone I will hear a "we" thrown in there and when it's not obvious to me who the "we" are I'll just ask, "Who's we?" That's what we should be asking here; who's the you'all here? I think it's the church; that's who he's writing to.

This letter has a fairly simple structure; there's an initial command from John; then there's a warning; and finally, there's a remedy for that warning. Let's look at all of these.

First, the command is in vs. 5. He says, "And now I ask you, dear lady - not as though I were writing you a new commandment, but the one we have had from the beginning - that we love one another." That's what John wants to see this church continue in. It's not new; I've told you before. So keep doing it more and more.

In vs. 6 John echoes something that we read about in the Gospel of John and even 1 John. We see this reciprocal discussion about love and obeying God's commands. When you

love, you obey God's commands. Guess what happens when you obey God's commands? You love well for love is the sum of all of God's commands. So, here's the point: Church, love each other more and more; it's a command. Some of you are doing this; keep doing it. Those who aren't, remember this is God's command and walk in it. What a great reminder for us.

But, next, John gives a warning. Do you see the first word in vs. 7? "For many deceivers have gone out into the world." That first word let's you know that this warning about deceivers going into the world deceiving people is connected to his command for them to love one another. He's saying (notice the connection), "Love one another for (because) many deceivers have gone out in the world." John thinks that what these false teachers are lying about has the power to limit their love for one another. It's like saying, "Make sure you wear your hat and mittens for many snowflakes are coming into the world." We're going to talk about this more in a minute because in this warning we see the Christmas connection.

But before we do, let's quickly identify the remedy. That's found in vs. 10-11 (READ). John is telling this church not to host or make accommodations for teachers who are deceiving church members. That makes sense, right? The practice of hospitality was a very significant gift in the 1st century. With no Motel 6's or Holiday Inn Expresses to be found, where would travelers stay? Most often, they would stay with people who practice hospitality. False and deceit teachers took advantage of this in the church. Because who should be the most hospitable of all? Followers of Jesus, of course, who God invited into to find shelter for their souls. And if you're going to be hospitable to strangers, how much more should you invite in "teachers" of God? So, what happened from time to time in the 1st century is that churches actually walked away from the Lord with the help of these false and deceptive teachers who would stay in their homes. So, John is saying, "Don't let them in! Don't even greet them! As soon as you let them in you not only do you put the church in jeopardy, but you become complicit to their wicked work."

There are 21st century parallels to this. While we may not host false teachers in our homes, we might share their books with others in our Titus 2 mentoring class. We might rave about a book or a preacher on our facebook page or invite a group of men to one of their conferences. And by doing so, we spreading those message and words far and wide. It just goes to show you that we are constantly in need of great discernment. We desperately need to use our mind, referring to the scriptures and consulting with our own church family and leaders to reduce the risk of our taking part in wicked works (as John puts it). That's not our intent, I'm sure, just like it wasn't the intent of these hospitable church members either. But it can happen.

So, that's the general point of 2 John. What I want to zero in on is the teaching of these false teachers that threatened their love for one another. What was that? Let's read vs. 7 again (READ).

So, what John says these deceitful teachers reject is the coming of Jesus in the flesh. That's the Christmas connection; that's what Christmas is about; the coming of God in the flesh.

Let's remind ourselves of that. Turn with me to John 1 and read vs. 1-4 (READ). The focal point of John's introduction here in vs. 1 is this Word. This Word isn't merely a word that you will find in a dictionary. This Word is eternal (he is from the beginning); this Word is Divine (he was God). This Word is personal; he's not a thing (in him was life); And this Word is the opposite of evil (he shines in the darkness). John is letting us know that everything about this Word is great; we want him. Look who this Word is in vs. 14 (READ).

This Word is the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. Who's that? Well, this is what the Angel Gabriel said to the virgin Mary when she became pregnant with Jesus (READ Luke 1:34-35). Are you seeing the connections, friends? Don't just believe me? See for yourself in the scriptures; this eternal and divine Word, the only Son of the Father is the baby boy born to the virgin Mary and Joseph and they named him Jesus. God became man.

John says in 2 John 7 that a person is a deceiver and the antichrist if he or she denies that. This denial is really significant; look at vs. 9, "Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ [what teaching? The coming of Jesus in the flesh] does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son."

There are litmus tests to determining who is a Christian and who are not; there are a number of them, in fact. Now, some aren't always easy to discern (like, "everyone born of God overcomes the world." How do you know if you've overcome the world?); but some are pretty black and white, right? You either confess that Jesus has come in the flesh or you don't. John said this in his first letter, 1 John 4:2: "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God." That sounds a lot like our passage, doesn't it? There is a difference, though, and it's a matter of the verb tense. In 1 John we read, "confesses that Jesus *has come* in the flesh." But in 2 John the tense is present; whoever "does not confess *the coming* of of Jesus Christ in the flesh." What does that mean? What's the difference? The difference seems to be a matter of an ongoing reality. It's not just that Jesus came in the flesh, but now exists as some ghostly person. No, Jesus came in the flesh, died in the flesh, was resurrected in the flesh and lives forever in that bodily form.

As I thought and studied this passage for the past several weeks, I scratched my head a lot. What's the connection? To me, the *what* is rather clear from the text. John is saying rather clearly that if you loosen your grip, your conviction and confession that Jesus Christ is God himself in the flesh, real flesh and blood, you're going to stop loving each other according to the commandment of God. That's the point: Don't loosen your grip on the reality of the incarnation (that's the doctrine that Jesus Christ is God in the flesh) because you'll stop loving each other. But the *why* wasn't as clear. Why does that happen? Why will we stop loving each other if we deny the incarnation? Here's why it works this way.

First of all, you need to understand why there would be false teachers denying the incarnation in the first place. Just one generation has past from when Jesus walked on the earth; I mean there were some who were eye witness just like John. There was a philosophy in

that day called gnosticism; it's actually still alive today. Gnosticism teaches that the only thing that matters is the immaterial; the spiritual. This body, flesh and blood, isn't important. What we do with our bodies doesn't matter. So, if the immaterial is what really counts and this earthly, fleshly body doesn't count for anything, then Jesus being flesh and blood wouldn't matter either. In fact, some gnostic teachers believed that the true, eternal Son of God only inhabited Jesus of Nazareth at the time of his baptism and then left his body before the crucifixion; the perfect Son of God couldn't possibly suffer the dishonor of being born of a woman or dying like a criminal.

This gnosticism is still alive and well today. It's very tempting to believe that what I think or believe in my mind is what matters most. This is how sexual immorality, for example, can be justified by followers of Jesus. I *believe* and *know* the right things, so it doesn't matter what I do in the bedroom. Why would I need to attend church every week, why would I need to practice the Lord's Supper or actually give until it hurts? Paul says in Titus 1:16, "They profess to know God, but they deny him by their works." How do you get there; how do you get to a place when you know the right things in your mind, but not practice what you know? One way is by gnostic temptations: thinking that believing in Jesus "in my heart" is more important than a faith that moves these hands, these feet and this mouth. Guess what: when you believe in Jesus in your heart, it shows in what you do with your real body and with the 24 hours you've been given in a day and with the money you earn every week.

So, here's one reason why denying Jesus came in the flesh will make you unloving: You'll forget that love requires real sacrifice and physical, bodily effort. My son, Elijah, and I are planning on going on the Nepal mission trip in March. We've been strongly encouraged to go; we've prayed about it so, Lord willing, we're going. But since making that decision, I've talked with a few people who have traveled either to Nepal itself or to that part of the world. And I'm hearing things like this: the last time we went to Nepal, it took 40 hours of travel time to get home. I ate some bad food and had diarrhea for 3 days. You want to make sure you get vaccinated because you might get infected with this or with that. Make sure you always drink bottled water. The roads are terrible and you jostle around for hours when you go from here to there. That's what I'm hearing; just how miserable everything is. My enthusiasm for the trip is not going up. Why go? I'm planning to suffer; I'm planning on being uncomfortable, I'm planning on making sacrifices. I'm not going for the adventure; I'm a boring person perfectly content with sub-zero Wisconsin temperatures and maple trees. I don't need Everest. But, this is what love looks like. Love sacrifices; love suffers. I can't love kids in Nepal with well-wishes from across the ocean. I have to be willing to put my love into action. Just like Jesus, the Eternal Son of God, disrobing himself of his kingly garments to clothe himself in frail humanity. Just like Jesus who had real nails driven through his real hands and feet, with a real nervous system and real pain. Jesus was uncomfortable for me; Jesus sacrificed meals for me. That's what love looks like.

If we deny Jesus came in the flesh we can drift away from real love thinking that I really have love just because I may get emotional when I hear a sad story or when I see a vivid picture or movie. Love is not feeling sorry and sad for a while and then going home to my warm house

and comfortable bed and big TV and spend the rest of the evening eating popcorn. 1 John 3:18 says, "Little children, let us not love in word or talk, but in deed and in truth." And if you stop believing that Jesus came in the flesh you might just start drifting away from a pure love for one another.

Since love is birthed in us by God's grace when we gaze upon the beauty of God's love for us in Christ, we must make sure we guard against looking at a distorted and deficient view of God's love. That's what Christmas tells us: God's love is so deep and grand that God became flesh and dwelt among us. He took upon himself every fleshly limitation and pain so he could be near to you and me. Let's not give that up; and let's not live like it doesn't matter. It does. And the more we see why it matters, the more we will love another just like John says.

Key vs. ~ 2 John 7

Questions for the week

- When are you most likely to forget the reason for the season?
- What's one thing you learned from 2 John today that you think will help you in your walk with Jesus?
- What's one thing you want to change about your Christmas routine to help you in your walk with Jesus? What are the steps you will take to make those changes?