

2 John 9-11 and Fellowship

Tim Haile

{9} "Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. {10} If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; {11} for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds."

This passage is devastating to those who practice any form of "unity-in-diversity." We live in a world that idealizes tolerance and compromise, and people do not want to be reminded of a passage like the above. They do not want to be told whom they may or may not fellowship. They want to feel free to accept people into their fellowship *on their own terms*, often regardless of what those people *believe, teach or practice*. We are often told by modern religionists that it is "Christlike" to be open to a diversity of beliefs, doctrines and practices. However, in verses 9-11 of his second epistle, John tells us quite differently. He tells us that our fellowship with God is conditioned upon our adherence to the doctrine of Christ and our refusal to fellowship those who do not bring that doctrine.

Interestingly, the word "fellowship" (Gr. *koinonia*, meaning *joint participation, sharing*), is not used until verse 11, where it is used of *sharing in evil*. An example of John's use of the word *fellowship* in its good sense can be found in his first epistle when he wrote, "But if we walk in the light, as He is in the light, we have **fellowship** (*koinonia*) with one another..." (1 John 1:7). He had just stated that one cannot have fellowship with God while walking in darkness (*sin*, 1 Jn. 1:6). One must walk in the light (*truth*) in order to have fellowship with God. The first part of 1 John 1:7 parallels 2 John 9. Both verses deal with fellowship between man and God, and both verses condition man's fellowship with God upon his *walking in the truth*. Notice the parallel that also exists between 1 John 1:7 and 2 John 4 and 3 John 3-4: John rejoiced when he heard that his "children" (Christians) were "*walking in the truth*." Walking in the "light" is walking in the "truth."

As we noted above, fellowship with God cannot be had by those who walk in the darkness of evil, sin and error (1 John 1:6). Many people understand the fellowship principle as it relates to the *actual practice of sin*, but it appears that some do not understand the principle as it relates to our interaction with others. Particularly, with those who practice sin. It is this principle that John addresses in verses 10 and 11 of his second epistle. John says that one participates in "evil" when he "receives into his house" or "wishes" one "well" who does not bring the doctrine of Christ. By receiving such a person, the receiver becomes a *partaker* in evil. One's unlawful acceptance,

encouragement and support of one who “does not bring the doctrine of Christ” makes him complicit in that sin. He suffers the consequences of that behavior, which means that he also loses his fellowship with God (1 Jn. 1:5-7). 2 John 10 and 11 teach that our fellowship with others has a direct bearing upon our fellowship with God. This explains why these words of John have been so controversial. Some outright reject John’s warning in this passage. The consciences of others won’t allow them to go quite so far, but they have worked very hard at *diluting* the passage in an effort to loose themselves from its rules and restraints. Let us put aside any biases that we may have, and let us consider the real meaning and significance of what is taught, both *implicitly* and *explicitly*, in this passage.

The Sins of 2 John 9-11

John addresses three possible sins: 1. The sin of *going beyond*, and *failing to abide* in the teaching of Christ (v. 9). 2. The sin of *not bringing the doctrine of Christ*. This sin is inferred from the fact that by receiving one who does not bring the doctrine of Christ, one partakes in his “evil” deed. It is therefore implied to be “evil” for one to “bring not” the doctrine of Christ. 3. The sin of *receiving* those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ.

1. Going Beyond the Doctrine of Christ (verse 9):

John warns against “going onward” (beyond the doctrine of Christ). The King James has “transgresseth.” This Greek word (proago) means to progress (beyond) some fixed standard. John identifies this standard as being the *doctrine of Christ*. Some people want to do *more* than what is authorized in Scripture. John here teaches that we are fenced in by the teaching of Christ. We are not at liberty to do all that we desire. As taught also throughout the Old Testament (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:6), we are forbidden to “add to” the word of God. Certain men of Paul’s day *perverted* the gospel (Gal. 1:7) by adding circumcision and Mosaic law-keeping to its requirements (Gal. 6:12,13; Acts 15:1,5). John warned against adding to his teaching (Rev. 22:18). All Scripture is inspired of God (*God-breathed*, 2 Tim. 3:16). As such, “*every word of God is precious*” (Prov. 30:5), and it should be *respected* for what it is. We are prohibited from venturing beyond the boundaries of its authority. The gospel is therefore *restrictive* in its nature. John tells us that the failure to act within the parameters and guidelines of this doctrine results in severance of our fellowship with God (2 Jn. 9).

Religious “progressives” are often praised for their so-called “good works,” innovativeness and ingenuity. Though we may sometimes speak of a person “making good progress” in the accomplishment of some task, this is **not** the kind of “progress” that John speaks of in 2 John 9. This passage teaches that it is sinful for men to “progress” beyond the things that are

authorized by the New Testament. We are to *speak and act* as those who will be judged by the law of liberty (Jas. 2:12). With regard to the things that we *say and do*, we are commanded to "*do all in the name of* (by the authority of) *the Lord Jesus*" (Col. 3:17).

This last passage has been scrutinized by some. They attempt to narrow its application by citing the fact that "we don't have scriptural authority for *everything* that we do..." I admit to having witnessed some carelessness in the use of Colossians 3:17. Obviously, there is a context of *divine legislation* that must be considered. For example, God has not legislated the kind of *job* that I am to have, the kind of vehicle that I am to drive, whether I own or rent a dwelling, the kind of hobby that I may have, etc... However, within the realm of divine revelation, God has legislated behavior. This is the realm of "*all things that pertain to life and godliness*" (2 Pet. 1:3). It is the realm of "*things that pertain to God*" (Rom. 15:17), and that "*concern the Lord Jesus Christ*" (Acts 28:31). It is in this realm that conduct and fellowship are regulated by God. When God specifies a certain belief, teaching or practice, we must accept and obey God.

Christ has "all authority" (Matt. 28:18), and humans are obligated to "*observe all things*" that He has commanded (Matt. 28:20). Christ is "Lord," and as such He is to be "served" (Col. 3:24). As the possessor of the "*key of David*," He "*opens and no man shuts, and shuts and no man opens*" (Rev. 3:7). The one with the "key" is the one with the authority to act, and what great authority Christ has! Along with the key of David, He also holds the "*keys of hell and of death*" (Rev. 1:18). This authority was demonstrated in His raising of the dead. By commanding Lazarus to "come forth," Jesus commanded a departed spirit to be reunited with its host body (Jas. 2:26). As the judge of all mankind, Jesus administers both punishment and reward (Col. 3:24; Jn. 5:22, 27; 2 Cor. 5:10; Rom. 14:10-12). We are answerable to Christ, and His authoritative gospel is the standard by which we are judged (Jn. 12:48). This is why it is so very necessary for us to "abide in" that teaching. Our spiritual fate depends upon it.

2. Not Bringing the Doctrine of Christ (verse 10):

John's words are often applied to those who teach overt error - things *in addition* to the gospel ("*another gospel*" - Gal. 1:8). And though it is common for men to avoid (bringing) certain Bible doctrine in deference to their own doctrines (Mark 7:9), John's language is more specific than this. John's actual wording suggests a refusal to "bring" (teach) the doctrine of Christ, or, as in the case of the Gnostics, a refusal to teach ***all truth***. Contrast John's language with what is used in other passages that address the deception of hearers:

Romans 16:17 - Tells us to "*mark and avoid*" those who "*cause divisions and offenses contrary to the doctrine*" which we have learned.

Titus 3:10, 11 - Tells us to "*reject*" **heretics**. A "heretic" is one who teaches his own opinions as truth.

Titus 1:11, 13 - Tells us to "*sharply rebuke*" and "*silence*" those who "**teach things that they ought not to teach.**" These teachers added their own teaching to that of Christ.

1 Timothy 6:3-5 - Tells us to "*withdraw*" from factious men who create dissension by teaching a doctrine that is different from the doctrine of Christ (cp. Gal. 1:8,9).

Acts 20:30 - Paul warned the Ephesian elders that some would "*arise and speak twisted things to draw away disciples after them.*"

These passages address the practice of *false teaching*. That is, teaching that is *different from*, and *in addition to* the teaching of Christ. Men can certainly be deceived by a teacher's false doctrines (Eph. 4:14). However, there is another way for a teacher to deceive hearers. He can simply avoid teaching *all* truth. John condemns this practice in 2 John 10. By not bringing the doctrine of Christ one is guilty of *omitting* truth. And while it is often the case that men bring error in the place of truth, this is not *always* the case. There are times when men selectively bring *some* truth to the *exclusion* of other truth. In such instances, no false doctrines or practices are proposed by the teacher, but neither are they *exposed!* The problem is not with what the teacher says, but with what he doesn't say.

The Gnostics of John's day refused to acknowledge and teach "*that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh.*" They were the "*not confessing ones*" (*oi mē homologountes*) (2 Jn. 7; 1 Jn. 4:3). Upon this basis John called them "deceivers" and "antichrist." Like millions today, these men were willing to acknowledge some truths about Christ, but they would not acknowledge that He was *God in the flesh*. They did not bring the doctrine of Christ on the subject of Christ's nature. The failure to bring the doctrine of Christ amounts to "taking away from" God's word. The Bible warns as much against this as it does "adding to" God's word. Consider the following:

Deuteronomy 4:2 - "*Ye shall not add unto the word which I command you, neither shall you diminish ought from it..*"

Deuteronomy 12:32 - "*What thing soever I command you, observe to do it: thou shalt not add thereto, neither diminish from it.*"

Revelation 22:18,19 - ¹⁸ "*For I testify unto every man that heareth the words of the prophecy of this book, if any man shall add unto these things, God shall add unto him the plagues that are written in this book.* ¹⁹ *And if*

any man take away from the words of the Book of this prophecy, God shall take away his part out of the book of life, and out of the holy city, and from the things that are written in this book.

Some of the most popular and influential preachers of our time are men who preach the truth, but do so only *partially*. A good example of this is **Joel Osteen**. Perhaps you have seen him on television. I have seen several of his broadcasts, and on several of these occasions I have heard him do an excellent job in preaching the truth on different Bible subjects. At such times, the danger is not in *what he teaches*, but in *what he doesn't teach*. He does not *bring the doctrine of Christ* at certain times. For example, he invites people to "receive Jesus," but not in the way that is taught in Acts 2:41 and 38. Mr. Osteen teaches only *part* of the plan of salvation. The same has been true of men like **Billy Graham, John Haggee** and many others. Don't misunderstand; these men do teach dangerous errors on occasion, but there are times when they preach the truth. At such times it is what they don't say that makes them dangerous.

"Joel Osteens" Among Us

Sadly, today, we are witnessing this same partial-truth preaching practice among "gospel" preachers, that we see among the denominations. These men carefully and craftily bring "the truth," but only those portions and parts of the truth that will help them to maintain their popularity. Some are fooled by these men. These "preachers" have learned the *social and financial* value of *selective* Bible teaching. They learn what people *like and* what they *don't like* in religion; what they *want to hear* and what they *don't want to hear*. They then tell them only those parts of the Bible that they want to hear. Paul warned Timothy that "*the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths*" (2 Tim. 4:3, 4).

I have watched what some preachers do in order to achieve popularity among brethren: they preach "the truth" *boldly*, but only those truths that do not require people to take the kind of stance that will cost them their friendship and fellowship with others. They speak "*smooth things*" (Isa. 30:10). Their "hard" preaching is really only *perceived* to be that way, for though they may make some people feel badly about certain things that they are doing, no specific remedy is given for the "sin." Their preaching is not specific with regard to application, for that could make hearers mad or uncomfortable. Any specificity in their preaching is geared toward making hearers *feel* a certain way. These men preach so as to **comfort the afflicted, and to afflict the comforted**. For example, Christians can be made to feel guilty when some preachers wax eloquent about how they are

"not praying enough." If you ask one of these preachers how much praying is either "enough" praying, or "not enough" praying, he will say that he does not know. Well then, upon what basis does such a preacher make his case for "more" prayer? Why use the word "enough?" Why not just teach what the Bible teaches about the importance and purpose of prayer? Other sermons will urge people to do things like do "better," be "more" loving, and be "more" spiritual. Emotions are manipulated to make hearers *feel* that they are simply not *good, loving* or *spiritual* enough, but no solution is given to the problem (assuming that there is a problem)! And how much goodness, love and spirituality are "enough?" The preacher cannot tell us! He sees his job as developing sufficient speaking skills to be able to make people either laugh or cry at the appropriate times. He is no defender of the faith (Phil. 1:17); he casts down no lofty arguments (2 Cor. 10:5); he exhorts, but he does not reprove or rebuke (2 Tim. 4:2). He won't do these things, for he doesn't want to run the risk of being fired, or of becoming unpopular. Such preachers are nothing more than hirelings (see Jn. 10:12,13). They cannot be trusted in the battle for Truth.

"But, What Error Does He Teach?"

There have been times when I have opposed the use of certain preachers because of their unwillingness to expose error. Invariably, there will be someone who asks, "But what error does he teach?" Well, what error did Peter preach that caused Paul to rebuke him at Antioch? (Gal. 2:11-14). Peter preached no error. Rather than remain with the Gentiles (with whom he ate), he separated from them upon the arrival of certain Jews. His sin was hypocrisy and cowardice. For fear of whatever reason, He was unwilling to confront the Judaizers who came from James. Peter's actions on this occasion remind us of Obadiah's condemnation of Edom. He said, "*For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off forever. In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, **even you were as one of them***" (Obad. 1:10, 11). Edom was condemned for her **inaction**. Some preachers are guilty of this same type of compromise today. Some, like Barnabas and the other Jews, are politically and socially affected by those "*who seem to be pillars.*" Others are concerned about job security or popularity. Judges 5:23 says, "*Curse ye Meroz, said the angel of the Lord, curse ye bitterly the inhabitants thereof; **because they came not to the help of the Lord, to the help of the Lord against the mighty.***" Just a reminder: Hell awaits spiritual cowards (Rev. 21:8 - "fearful" = cowardice, timidity; Lk. 9:26; 2 Tim. 1:7).

The Bible frequently emphasizes the importance of ***all Truth***.

Jeremiah 1:10 - Jeremiah was to speak to the people **"all"** that God commanded him.

Proverbs 30:5 - *"Every word of God is pure..."*

Matthew 4:4 - *"Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God."*

Acts 5:20 - The apostles were to *"Go stand and speak in the Temple to the people all the words of this life."*

Acts 10:33 - Cornelius and others were gathered to hear **"all things"** that were commanded by God.

Acts 20:20, 26, 27 - Paul **"kept back nothing"** that was profitable for the hearers. He was pure from the blood of all men because he had not shunned to declare **"all"** the council of God.

Psalms 119:6 - David said, *"Then shall I not be ashamed when I have respect for all of your commandments."*

John warned against not bringing the doctrine of Christ (whether in lieu of bringing some *other* doctrine, or in an effort to lessen the requirements of the doctrine of Christ). The reason is irrelevant, for the consequence is the same either way: people are deceived into sin. As teachers, let us not attempt to soften the force of the gospel by holding back what is profitable for hearers.

3. The Sin of Receiving Those Who Do Not Bring The Doctrine of Christ (verses 10, 11):

Few passages have been more ignored, misrepresented, and outright rejected than this one. Why? Because John here places restrictions upon *fellowship*. "Fellowship" means *joint participation*, or *sharing* (in some activity, whether a good activity, or a bad one). Most people do not want to be told who they can or cannot receive into their fellowship. They want to feel free to associate and participate with whomever they choose. Some ignore John's prohibition because they have a relaxed view of sin and error. They take *liberties* with God's standard in order to avoid having to condemn the sins and errors of others. Some of the most common causes of this are *family relations*, *social relations*, *church relations* and *friendships*. Some are *politically motivated* by their business associations. Businesses that provide religious services and materials, such as bookstores and colleges, have a tendency to compromise the truth in order to broaden their client base, and thus increase their sales. Others see religion as a numbers game. They know that strict adherence to 2 John 10,11 will limit their numbers, and they want to be a part of a large church. Regardless of the reason, John teaches us that we are not permitted to fellowship just *anyone*.

Some people are aware of the consequences of teaching error, and of refusing to teach and practice all truth, but they have no objection to *receiving* those who engage in these practices. They see no relationship between these two actions. They feel that they can support and encourage the errorist without being guilty of his sin. John says such actions make one a "partaker" in his "evil deeds." It is **sinful** to welcome and provide aid for those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ. 2 John 9-11 is not the only New Testament passage that makes this point. Paul told the Ephesians to, "*have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them*" (Eph. 5:11). According to the next verse, the "them" refers to those who practice sin. They are to be *exposed*, not received.

Implication of 2 John 11

What about receiving the supporters of those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ? How shall we treat them? This is a pertinent question, considering how many churches there are that receive those who do not bring the doctrine of Christ. John did charge the errorist well-wisher with the sin of that errorist. We must conclude that the same principle again applies, and that it is sinful to (knowingly) support those who receive these deceivers and wish them well.

Conclusion

Fellowship with God is a special and serious matter. John warns us of certain actions that can result in our fellowship with God being broken. Since God's law governs fellowship, in order to retain our fellowship with God we must operate within the confines of what is allowed by the doctrine of Christ. We must also be careful about who we encourage and support. Some do not bring the doctrine of Christ, and though some assert that "doctrinal differences are irrelevant," John affirms that doctrinal purity is paramount to our salvation.