



MESSAGE

STUDY GUIDE

GROUP MATERIAL

SONGS

Elder Statesman John vs Trend of Hierarchy

Bible Reading: 2 John 1:1-6

•**SUMMARY:** Second John is a brief letter from “the elder” to “the chosen lady and her children,” offering insight into John’s distinct vision of church life. Unlike the ‘overseers’ in Acts and Paul’s letters, ‘John the elder’ is the patriarch, the elder statesman of the Johannine community, drawing on personal authority rather than holding an official position. This contrasts sharply with Pauline churches, where Paul adopted the Jewish synagogue model of appointing elders and deacons, establishing a hierarchical structure that laid the groundwork for apostolic succession, as seen in the Pastoral Epistles. In 1-3 John, “the elder” exhorts based on his eyewitness testimony within an egalitarian community, where all believers have the Spirit’s anointing, love one another, and know the truth. This structural divergence was evident in first-century Ephesus, where both churches coexisted. Historically, the Pauline churches evolved into the centralized structures of the Roman Catholic Church, while John’s community stood as a counter-model. Modern attempts to ‘recover’ the original Pauline church have followed the same path. John’s letters offer a compelling biblical alternative for us to follow today.

•BACKGROUND:

John ‘the Elder’ adds another aspect to the NT portrait of the person & his ‘Johannine community.’ This message is not based on this item – John ‘the elder’— alone, but rather the overall NT portrait which includes:

1. John as the ‘Beloved Disciple’ in the 4th Gospel, including (a.) the ‘race to the tomb’ (Jn. 20:3-10), (b.) Jesus’ words regarding Peter & the ‘Beloved Disciple’ in Galilee (Jn. 21) – both validate John’s distinct ministry.
2. History suggests John outlived the Apostles James, Peter, & Paul. John moved to Ephesus’ area ~70 AD.
3. ‘Pauline church(es)’ & ‘Johannine church(es)’ coexisted in the Ephesus area 80-100 CE (see V. below)
4. Paul’s churches developed as described in Acts through to the Pastorals, John’s churches in 1-3 John.

I. ‘The Elder’ – Official Position or ‘Elder Statesman’? (2 Jn. 1)

A. NT ‘Elder’ can mean office/position or simply ‘aged’/‘senior’ (1 Peter 5:1, 5)

B. Two Views on ‘the Elder’ in 2 John, 3 John

1. Minority View: ‘the Elder’ in 2-3 John matches Paul’s Practice
2. Majority View: ‘the Elder’ (2-3 John) — Personal, Relational, ‘Old Man,’ Patriarch

C. 'The Elder' (2-3 John) — "John was the 'elder statesman' of Christianity" –Bruce Barton

II. "Alternative NT Models of Church Leadership

A. Contrasting Patterns of Governance – Paul's Churches vs. John's Churches

B. The Hierarchical Structure of Paul's Churches

• "In the Pastorals [there's] a fairly complex hierarchy of church leadership that includes bishops, elders, & deacons." –Kenton L. Sparks

1. Hierarchy: Apostles, Elders/Overseers, Deacons, Regular Church Members

2. Emphasis on Office (position) – "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer" (1 Tim. 3:1 ESV)

3. Timothy & Titus as Apostolic Delegates

4. Authority & Submission in the local church

III. Elders' Governance in the Churches Paul Planted

A. Paul's Model based on Jewish Synagogue Practice (Acts 14:23)

? In "Acts, Paul appointed elders over his... churches (Acts 14:23) ... Paul probably established his churches along the pattern of the elder-system of the Jewish synagogue." –John Polhill

B. Functional Apostolic Succession in Paul's Pastorals (2 Tim. 2:2)

• In the Pastorals "a concept of 'apostolic succession' [is] beginning to emerge." –James Dunn

C. No Apostolic Succession in John's Letters (1-3 John)

• "The Johannine letters contain no nascent doctrine of apostolic succession." –D. Moody Smith

D. Personal authority of 'the elder' is not transferrable, unlike office, position

• "The elder has... personal authority... Its not an authority based on an institution or appointed office." –Paul Trebilco

E. Contrasting Church Leadership Structures — John's Letters vs. Paul's Pastorals

• "In the Pastorals [1-2 Tim.] we have... appointed leadership positions, & the beginning of institutionalization ... By contrast the author of 1 John... write[s] a letter without mentioning any leaders &... stress[es] that the community does not need a teacher." –Paul Trebilco

• "There is a remarkable lack of hierarchical structures in the Johannine Letters. It is rather the horizontal, family relationships that are highlighted; the author... addresses the believers... as 'children,' 'beloved,' or 'brothers [& sisters]'" –Mikael Tellbe

IV. John's Churches – An Alternative Way of Doing Church

• The Elder "presents another way... in deliberate response... to the... hierarchical structures... in the Pauline tradition..." –Mikael Tellbe

A. No single, God-approved way of doing church

• "The NT do[es] not attest to any... uniformity or a single indistinguishable pattern (where every [Church] did exactly the same thing...) ... Church leaders... [should] no longer assume... their task is to find a single uniform description of the NT church." –JP. Harrison, JD. Dvorak

B. The Elder exercises his personal authority 'democratically'

• "The elder... expresses his relationship in an egalitarian way, as one of them, on the same level... There's ... a 'democratic' tone ... the author expresses his authority... 'democratically'." –Thomas Johnson

V. Paul's Church & John's Church coexisting in Ephesus 80-100 CE

• "From around 80-100 CE there were a number of different groups in Ephesus... – [1.] the Pauline group addressed by the Pastorals, [2.] the Johannine group spoken of in 1-3 John ... The Pauline group and the Johannine group were distinct & separate communities, although they maintained non-hostile contact." –Paul Trebilco

VI. Different Trajectories

A. Paul's Pastorals – Trend towards Catholicism

• "It's... difficult to deny... the Pastorals are already some way along the trajectory of early Catholicism." –J. Dunn

B. Johannine Christianity – A Reaction & Counter-Trend

• "Early Catholicism was not the only trajectory... to emerge from the 1st-century... The Johannine alternative... has in fact prospered after a fashion." –James Dunn

• "Johannine writings are... a reaction against early Catholicism." –James Dunn

• The Elder "presents another way... in deliberate response... to the... hierarchical structures... in the Pauline tradition..." –Mikael Tellbe

