The text of 2 John is one of the shortest documents in the New Testament, relative in length to 3 John, Philemon, and Jude. It compares favorably in form to private letters of the first century. The author identifies himself as the Presbyter (verse 1) and addresses his correspondence to the “Chosen Lady” (verse 1), a probable reference for a local church. The central concerns of this letter are clarifications concerning correct doctrine (verse 7) and a boycott policy concerning the acceptance and recognition of traveling missionaries who do not adhere to correct doctrine (verse 10).

The writing of 2 John may be viewed as an act of leadership. An analysis of 2 John reveals much about the Presbyter’s exercise of leadership and the phenomenon of leadership itself. The specific foci of analysis here are the ways in which the Presbyter addresses and interacts with adherents, the manner in which he refers to his opponents, the ways in which he legitimates the distinction between adherents and opponents, and his evident literary and rhetorical strategy. These analyses contribute to an overall assessment of leadership reflected in 2 John.

I. Adherents

Adherents are identified and analyzed on the basis of explicit or implicit references to names, titles, labels, indications of status, character, or behavioral characteristics. The following categories are discussed: (a) chosen lady, chosen sister, and children; (b) knowers of truth; (c) recipients of grace, mercy, and peace; (d) commandment keepers; and (e) possessors of God. The English translation employed throughout this article is the New American Bible (1986).
Chosen Lady, Chosen Sister, and Children

2 John is framed by references to the chosen lady (verse 1), the chosen sister (verse 13), and their children (verses 1, 13). Interpretations of these references were debated in the early church (cf. Westcott, 1966, pp. 223-24) and continue to be debated (cf. Brown, 1982, pp. 651-55 and Painter, 2002, p. 340). Three competitive interpretations are usually considered. These are: (a) the individual, (b) universal, and (c) local interpretations. Interpretation (a) would understand lady and sister to refer to female individuals. The children of these sisters would then be respective nieces and nephews. Interpretation (b) would understand lady and sister to function as symbols for the universal Church. Interpretation (c) understands lady and sister to function as symbols for distinct local churches. This latter interpretation is accepted here for several reasons.

The only document in the New Testament that addresses its recipient with a title, rather than with a personal name (as is the case with 3 John), or with a local designation (as is the case with many of Paul’s letters), is 2 John. Hence, the individual reference (interpretation [a]) is not likely in comparison. The titles “lady,” along with its descriptive adjective “chosen,” are both commonly used biblical metaphors for a church. Interpretation (b) runs into the problem of understanding how greetings might be exchanged between the universal Church (chosen lady) and the universal Church (chosen sister). Interpretation (a) also runs into the problem of understanding what the author of 2 John intends by the fluctuation of the second person singular and plural pronouns.

In the English text this fluctuation is not clear, the English “you” being ambiguous (see verses 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, 12 [twice], 13). In English “you” may be taken either as singular, referring to an individual person, or plural, referring to a group. But in the Greek language this ambiguity is avoided. In Greek the singular person pronoun is indicated by se, or by singular verb endings. This is the case in 2 John verses 4, 5, 13. The plural personal pronoun is indicated by hemeis, or by plural verb endings. This is the case in 2 John verses 6, 8, 12 [twice]. In the Greek text clarity is provided by the presence of the singular ‘se’ (verses 4, 5, 13) and the plural ‘hemeis’ (verses 6, 8, 10, 12 [twice]). Understanding, for example, the singular reference in verses four and five to refer to an individual woman, makes little sense in the context of verse six. Why would the Presbyter be asking this woman as a single individual to “love one another” (a reciprocal pronoun)? He could, or perhaps should have stated. “love others,” if this was his intended meaning. Chosen lady and chosen sister, then, make the most sense when understood as metaphors for two distinct churches. Problematic, however, is any precise location for these churches or any concrete information regarding their organizational structure. Speculation begins with the Johannine texts themselves. One is initially told that this church is “chosen” and that its members are “children.”

The opening address of 2 John, therefore, communicates status. The adherents are to understand themselves as chosen children. Behind the word chosen, it seems likely, is the rich and powerful idea of election by God. This concept is developed throughout the Jewish Scriptures (e.g., Deuteronomy 4:37; 7:6-7; 1 Kings 3:8; Isaiah 44:1-2) and receives thematic development in the gospel of John, especially evident in chapters 10, 15, and 17. 2 John is too brief to allow for thematic development of this concept but the fact that the correspondence of 2 John is framed by this concept (i.e., the presence of the word “chosen” in verses 1 and 13) is an indication that the concept was important to the author. This feature of 2 John reveals a relationship-building behavior that appeals to the higher-order needs (e.g., status, esteem, purpose) of the intended readers and may be viewed as creating high expectations for the performance of the instructions of this letter.

No role differentiation is apparent among the members of this elect group. They are all children, mutually obligated by the uniform instructions of the letter. This may reflect the author’s
exercise of individual consideration, a feature of transformational leadership. Since no
distinctions are evident for roles or levels of responsibility one might assume that the behavior of
each and every adherent was esteemed as equally important. Transformational leadership
theory suggests that effectiveness and performance of tasks are increased when all followers
are treated equally, or when those with minimal roles and responsibilities are treated as having

The uniform instructions of 2 John appear as the obligation of the Presbyter-author as
well. It is interesting how quickly the author’s identity merges with that of his adherents (note the
many first person plural references, verses 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8). Situational leadership theory would
view the author’s behavior here as participatory, an activity reflecting high relationship behavior
but low task behavior. This style would accord a moderate to high level of maturity to adherents
(cf. Hersey & Blanchard, 1977, p. 167). This suggests a sense of equality among individual
members, the author here included. The fact that the children are said to be “children of the
chosen lady/sister (verses 1, 4, 13) suggests that the adherents elect status, however individual
and egalitarian, is a corporate reality.

Knowers of the Truth

Truth (alētheia) is a key concept in all four Johannine documents, the gospel and three
epistles. Its fullest systematic development must be gleaned from John. As a single term it
gathers together the whole of what is distinctive to the Johannine ideology. Alexander (1962)
states: “Truth is the sphere in which Christians live, act, and are related” (p. 147). Knowing the
truth, then, is synonymous with being a Christian. This truth, however, does not appear to be the
private possession of each individual believer. The concept is personified in verse two (cf.
Brown, 1982, p. 658) where it is stated, “because of the truth that dwells in us and will be with
us forever” (italics added for emphasis). Truth, then, is greater than any individual Johannine
believer and appears to have a corporate dimension. As a shared possession its preservation
becomes the mutual obligation of all adherents. From a leadership perspective this conception
of truth functions powerfully. The maturity of each individual adherent is acknowledged.
Adherents appear capable of apprehending a sense of the corporate truth of the group. This
may be understood to empower and motivate the adherents to discover truth in a manner
consistent with the group. By this concept of the truth the author motivates his adherents,
facilitates a sense of cohesiveness, and creates something of a charismatic bond between
himself and the group. Authority, however legal, rational, traditional, or external to the individual
or group, is also conceived as residing in the unique abilities of the adherents.

Recipients of Grace, Mercy, and Peace

The divine realities of grace, mercy, and peace (verse 3) function much in the same
manner as the truth spoken of in the previous verse. The Johannine believer appears to be
assisted by these realities in a manner similar to the assistance attributed to the Spirit, a reality
abundantly mentioned in the gospel of John but without mention in 2 John or in 3 John. A
sparing, but strategic, mention appears in 1 John (see 1 John 5:6-8). A slight personification is
evident of these realities in 2 John. This perception is partially justified by the use of the
preposition “with” (meta). Meta, one of several prepositions possibly translated as “with,” may
connote, in addition to accompaniment, assistance as well (cf. Grundmann, 1971, p. 772). The
function of the divine realities of grace, mercy, and peace approximate that of the Holy Spirit in
the gospel of John. Cooperation with these realities is implied by the texts in 2 John that stress
responsibility (verses 5, 6, 8, 12). Bultmann (1973) perceives that “truth is not simply a
possession but must be grasped anew as a gift” (p. 108). This insight underlines the notion of
cooperation and seems to the point when considering warnings about the possible loss of truth (verse 8).

**Commandment Keepers**

Adherents are those who keep the commandment from the beginning (verse 5). Several insights are important here. A shift from the charismatic bond, mentioned above with regard to the concept of truth, to a traditional authority is evident here. The commandment appears to have two aspects, one ethical, the other doctrinal. The ethical aspect is specified in the exhortations to “love one another” (verse 5). The doctrinal aspect is specified in the exhortations to “walk in the truth” (verse 3) and the proper confession of Jesus (verse 7). These two aspects are distinct but inseparable. It seems that the author of 2 John struggles with his own notion, as is evident by the confusing fluctuation between the singular and the plural for the word commandment in verse six. This confusing fluctuation is a noted interpretive problem (cf. Brown, 1982, pp. 664-68). The author of 2 John is not perfectly logical with his usage of the word commandment when it is understood in conjunction with related notions. It seems that he is trying to say that adherents are obligated to one commandment, the one received from the beginning that involves both a proper confession of who Jesus is as well as a love for others who make the same confession. The ethical seems decidedly rooted in the doctrinal (cf. Kenney, 2000, p. vii). A significant argument for this is based upon the presence of the word “hoti” (because) in verse seven. Many translations overlook, even ignore, this conjunction, as does the NAB. Justification for this oversight may be based on the difficulty caused by the illogical thought of verses 4-6. But the presence of hoti necessitates a causal or logical relationship between the ethical exhortation of verses four to six and the doctrinal exhortation of verse seven. This, admittedly, is an involved discussion of a minute point. But its importance will become evident as the analysis proceeds through the remaining sections. There are yet other significant insights with regard to the notion of commandment.

The commandment is said to be from the beginning. Although several interpretations exist, the “beginning” here seems best understood as a reference to the beginning of the Jesus movement, namely, the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist. This interpretation is justified by an appeal to the use of the similar use of the phrase "from the beginning" in John 15:27 and 1 John 1:1, 2:7, 24, and, 3:11. It also parallels Acts 1:22.

A significant difference in perspective is evident between 2 John verse 5 and a parallel passage in 1 John. In 1 John the commandment from the beginning is presented as both “old” and “new” (2:7, 8). In 2 John verse 5 there is an omission of any sense of the newness of the commandment. Brown (1982) suggests that, “emphasis upon newness was not the Presbyter’s goal as he sought to alert the addresses against progressive teachers” (emphasis his, p. 685). The “progressive” teachers are mentioned in 2 John verse nine.

Of central concern in this study is the concept of authority. It is interesting to note that the author of 2 John does not base his authority for his commandment in his own person or office. Authority appears external to the author. It is traditional authority. The Presbyter appears to make this authority effective by means of his participatory leadership style. The Presbyter models that which he commands (verse 1) and portrays himself as being obligated by the commandment (verse 5).

Finally, all the norms indicated for adherents in 2 John, loving in truth (verse 1), knowing the truth (verse 1), walking in truth (verse 4), loving one another (verse 5), walking according to his commandments (verse 6), and proper confession of Jesus (verses 7, 9), seem to be comprehended by the concept of “commandment.”
Possessors of God

The English translation of 2 John 9 “whoever remains in the teaching has the Father and the Son” (emphasis added) often goes unnoticed by lay readers. The word “has” (echein) is significant because it is unique and evokes the covenantal mentality of Judaism (cf. Hanse, 1964, pp. 822-26). Hanse suggests that the Presbyter “takes the formula from the lips of his Gnostic opponents and uses it against them” (p. 824). Hanse’s comment alerts one to possibilities about the opponents’ self-understanding in 2 John. These opponents, quite plausibly, had counterclaims to a relationship with God. Hanse’s use of gnostic need not imply nor commit one to any specific gnostic system. Gnostic, understood as a fluid umbrella term for various heresies, is appropriate to this context. The opponents in 2 John, as is evident from the analysis in section two (below), do have gnostic traits. Finally, the notion of echein underlines, compliments, and supplements the “chosen” status of adherents mentioned at the beginning of my discussion of adherents.

In summary, the text of 2 John identifies the self-understanding of the adherents. Adherents have status as elect children (verses 3, 13). This status is corporately held (verse 2). Adherents share a common knowledge of the truth (verses 1, 2, 4), a possession threatened by false teaching (verse 8). Adherents are those who benefit from the assistance of grace, mercy, and peace (verse 3). The several norms governing adherent behavior are rooted in and comprehended by the one commandment from the beginning (verse 5), a beginning that reaches back to the start of Jesus’s public ministry (cf. John 15:27; Acts 1:22). Adherents, in contrast to opponents, enjoy a covenantal relationship with God.

II. Opponents

Many explicit and implicit references reveal the nature of opponents in 2 John. The following categories are discussed: (a) some of the children; (b) deceivers, those of the world, false believers, and antichrists; (c) progressives; and, (d) false missionaries.

Some of the Children

The phrase “some of your children” (verse 4) is a partitive genitive construction. Two distinct interpretations are possible, a rhetorical interpretation and a literal interpretation. The rhetorical interpretation softens the literal force of the word “some,” understanding the expression to refer positively to certain members of the group without implying anything negative about other members. This view is endorsed, for example, by Bruce (1970, p. 139), Brown (1982, p. 661), and Lieu (2012, p. 249). Others, such as Dodd (1946, p. 147), Hass (1972, p. 142), Kysar (1986, p. 126), and Painter, (2002, p. 247), opt for a literal interpretation. These interpreters understand this phrase to contain an initial hint concerning the presence of opponents. Haas (1972) states, “‘some of your children’ refers to a part of the congregation addressed. The expression implies dissension since it is another part which does not give reasoning for rejoicing” (p. 142). A preference for a literal translation is based on two considerations: (a) verse 4 is grammatically connected to verse 7, a verse which contains several explicit references to the opponents in 2 John. This connection is made by the presence of hoti (because) both in verse 4 and in verse 7 but overlooked by the NAB in the translation of each verse; and (b) a suggestive parallel to this usage appears in John 6:64, “but there are some of you who do not believe” (emphasis added). This gospel of John passage explicitly identifies opponents. However, the parallel is not given to suggest a literary dependence of 2 John upon the gospel but, rather, to simply cite an apparent parallel. Thus, after the typical
formulaic introduction of verses 1-3, the opponents come into immediate view at the opening of the body of the letter.

*Deceivers, Those of the World, False Believers, and Antichrists*

References to opponents are most heavily concentrated in verse 7. Initially, and perhaps tactically, the opponents are called deceivers (*planoi*). This term and its cognates *planaō* (deceive) and *planē* (deception), are consistently employed in classical Greek and Jewish literature to refer to that which is opposed to the truth (cf. Braun, 1968, pp. 218-53). This word group is found in 1 John (1:8; 2:26; 3:7; and, 4:6) and in 2 John verse 7. A study of these usages indicates that they stand in clear antithesis to the truth (Braun, 1968, p. 246). The positioning of *planoi* at the beginning of verse seven, particularly when viewed as prior to stating the content of the deception (i.e. “not acknowledging Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh”), seems tactical in that the author clearly intends, by this positioning of *planoi*, to underline this denial as a deception.

The reference to the world (*kosmos*) in verse 7 is its only occurrence in 2 John. *Kosmos* is used extensively, however, in the gospel of John (79 times) and in 1 John (23 times) and is thematically developed in these two documents. *Kosmos* may generally be understood to refer to the world that God created and/or its creature inhabitants. But the negative connotation of the sphere of opposition to God seems evident. The use here in 2 John seems consistent with its predominate negative use in John and in 1 John. But not all would agree (cf. Bultmann, 1973, p. 112).

The opponents in verse 7 are characterized as false believers. They appear to be heretics by default. One is told that which they deny rather than that which they affirm. They deny Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is interpreted by some commentators in a docetic sense, a denial of Jesus’s true humanity (cf. Anderson, 2011, p 142). A clearer understanding of the content of this denial is gleaned from an analysis of the developments of thought in John and in 1 John. The context of 2 John seems insufficient for a full understanding. Briefly, John and 1 John suggest that the opponents saw little, if any, salvific value to the fleshly human career of Jesus. It is not as if they denied completely that Jesus was human, rather, Jesus’s earthly actions, such as his teaching ministry and his death upon the cross, did not seem to have salvific significance for these opponents. In other words, salvation for the opponents was based more on Jesus’s heavenly origin than upon his earthly mission.

Support for this suggestion comes from the surprising use of the Greek present participle *erchomenon* (coming) found in 2 John 7. The grammatical implications of this usage are debated. The use of the present tense suggests more than would be understood by the use of the simple past or perfect participle (e.g., having come). After all, at the time of the writing of 2 John, Jesus’s birth, life, and death were past facts. It would seem more natural for the opponents to be portrayed as those denying that Jesus Christ had come in the flesh than as presently coming in the flesh. 1 John 4:2 cites this expression precisely in this manner, making 2 John’s use even more surprising and raising questions about literary and chronological relationships between 1 John and 2 John. Leaving these interesting considerations aside, however, it is more useful to consider the implications of the present tense. Strecker (1996, p. 233) sees a possible eucharistic reference, one that evokes the bread of life discourse in John 6: 22-59, especially verses 52-59. Other interpreters, including Strecker, see possible ongoing or future implications in 2 John’s use of the present participle. Perhaps Jesus’s present priestly and heavenly intercession or his future parousia are in view here (cf. Marshall, 1978, p. 70 and Lieu, 2012, pp. 254-55). References to Jesus’s heavenly intercession (1 John 2:2), the parousia (1 John 2:28), and to future judgment (1 John 4:17 and 2 John verse 8) lend plausibility to these suggestions.
Finally, these opponents are referred to as antichrists. The only occurrences of the word antichrist in the New Testament are found here in 2 John and in 1 John 2:18 and 4:1-3. However, the concept associated with this term does appear elsewhere (e.g., “the lawless one” of 2 Thessalonians 2:3). These and other texts appear to be drawing upon Jewish apocalyptic expectations of a rival messiah who would appear at the end of the world (cf. Kauder, 1975, pp. 124-26). The author of 2 John must have seen the signaling of this event in the activities of his opponents (cf. 1 John 2:18-19). Thus, the presence of the provocative term antichrist appearing again, tactically, at the end of verse 7, appears to both anchor and culminate the other pejoratives hurled at the opponents, reinforcing the seriousness with which the author viewed their deception.

**Progressives**

The word progressive is used by the NAB to translate the Greek proagō. This translation captures well the nuance contained in proagō and suggested by the context. Proagō, a compound of pro, meaning before, and agō, meaning to go, simply means to go before or to go ahead. Perhaps the opponents thought of themselves as advanced Christians. They, likely, could have understood themselves to enjoy a spiritual understanding of Christ beyond that of the ordinary Christian. Analogies abound in gnostic literature of the second century. If so, all that can be gleaned from 2 John is that this understanding depreciated Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. From 1 John a fuller picture off the opponents’ “progressiveness” may be drawn.

**False Missionaries**

The alleged advanced teaching of the opponents may be understood as the basis for the missionary activity evident in verse 10. The language of an official authorized campaign is evident in the terms that are used (e.g., erchomai [come], pherō [bring], didache [doctrine]). These terms suggest that the opponents had some semblance of organization. Unfortunately, no identifiable primary sources from the opponents have survived. A reconstruction of their views is based upon attempts to reconcile biblical texts with the 1945 Nag Hammadai texts and echoes of gnostic teaching in the literature of the church fathers.

In summary, the author of 2 John has carefully contrasted the portraits of adherents and opponents. The opponents are evident, even if only hinted at, in verse 4, the opening verse of the body of this letter. It is implied in verse 4 that these opponents were at one time adherents. 1 John 2:19 makes this explicit. The opponents are described as deceivers, those operating in the sphere of the anti-God world, deniers of the salvific value of the essential humanity of Jesus, antichrists who signal the end of the world. They understood themselves as advanced believers with a message and a purpose and an organized campaign. A probing beneath the surface of the differences between adherents and opponents uncovers issues of authority that are considered to legitimate these differences. The focus of this study now shifts to these issues.

**III. Legitimation**

Multiple references to authority are evident in 2 John. Although the bedrock of the authority of God and Jesus Christ (verse 3) may be assumed, the manner of the diffusion, location, and mediation of this ultimate authority is not altogether apparent. Clarification is provided from an analysis of the following categories: (a) the titles lady, sister, and Presbyter; (b) truth and religious experience; (c) the commandment from the beginning; (d) a confessional formula; and (e) the teaching of Christ.
The Titles Lady, Sister, and Presbyter

No personal names appear in 2 John, only titles. If, as was suggested above (section one), lady and sister are titles for distinct local churches, then these congregations, as congregations, may be understood to be locations, or occasions, for the manifestation of authority. Furthermore, if truth’s individual apprehension exists in tension with its corporate apprehension then the appeals to lady and to her sister, appeals which frame 2 John, underline a communal notion of authority. Authority resides in the group, is intrinsic to the group, and is preserved by the group (verses 1, 13). The author of 2 John legitimates his communications by appealing to a collective authority, mutually recognized by these two churches. This initial statement is refined in the remainder of this section. But, first, it needs to be asked, Who is the Presbyter? What authority is conveyed by his title? And, How does the Presbyter’s authority function within the letter?

Answers to these questions are debated. The title Presbyter in early Jewish/Christian literature could possibly mean several things: (a) an old or experienced adult male; (b) a church official; (c) an apostle of Christ; (d) a disciple of Jesus; or (e) a disciple of an apostle or of a disciple of Jesus (cf. Bornkamm, 1968, pp. 651-82). One’s decision for one or the other of these options prejudices a subsequent interpretation of 2 John. Several cautions are advised. Bultmann (1973) states, “It is certain only that the title designates the dignity and authority of the writer” (p. 95). Kummel (1975) adds, “The basis of the elder’s authority for issuing instructions cannot be determined” (p. 448). Kysar (1986) points out, “It is impossible from the available evidence to establish the precise nature of the office of elder and to discern the structure of the community” (p. 123). Nevertheless, in spite of these cautions, and only upon slender evidence, the view that the Presbyter refers to a disciple of an apostle or a disciple of Jesus is the view adopted here.

Prior to elaborating this view, and commenting on its slender evidence, an admission is made that speculations concerning the specific and inherent authority conveyed by the title Presbyter are not as valuable as inquiries into how the Presbyter’s authority functions in the text of 2 John (cf. Lieu, 1986, p. 64 and 2012, pp. 242-43). Inquiries regarding the functional demonstration of authority by the Presbyter are pursued after the following justifications for the view taken here.

The view that understands the Presbyter to refer to an old or experienced adult male is harmonious with all subsequent views, except when understood to convey a merely individual authority. It is rejected here for this reason. It is perceived, by the presence of the first person plural pronoun in 2 John verses 8 and 12, that the Presbyter, as Presbyter, has a corporate identity. In other words, there are other such Presbyters. A corporate identity is in harmony with all other views. But the view that Presbyter refers to a church official is rejected on the assumption that 2 John, 3 John, and 1 John are written by the same person. Indications within these texts appear out of harmony with what is elsewherelong known of the authority of Presbyters as church officials (e.g., the Pastoral letters). The view that understands the Presbyter as an apostle flounders against the current consensus that at least two stages, reflecting at least two distinct community crises, best explains the literary and chronological relationships between the gospel of John and the epistles of John (cf. vonWahlde, 2010, pp. 1-15 and Painter, 2002, pp. 339-40). Hence, though admitting slender evidence, the view that the Presbyter refers to a disciple of an apostle or even a disciple of a disciple of an apostle is preferred. The authority of the Presbyter, then, would be a representative authority, an authority that represents continuity with previous tradition.

Brown (1982) helpfully elaborates what is understood by this view: “Presbyter was a term designating members of the second generation in a chain of witnesses to the tradition: those who were not eyewitnesses of Jesus themselves but were disciples of the eyewitness
disciples” (p. 679). The study by van Unnik (1977) explores the range of authority enjoyed by such Presbyters. His analysis is judged compatible with the following analysis of just how the Presbyter’s authority appears to function in 2 John.

First, the Presbyter does write, apparently initiating the correspondence. Second, he does write as Presbyter, rather than by personal name. Some sense of confidence is inferred by these considerations. Yet the letter addresses a church as a church (i.e., a lady) and concludes with greetings from a sister church, presumably the church of which the Presbyter is a member. The inherent authority of these churches is thus recognized and respected throughout the letter.

The Presbyter initially sets himself forth as a role model (verse 1). He issues blessings (verse 3), offers thanksgivings and commendations (verse 4), reiterates the commandment (verse 5), provides a confessional formula (verse 7), admonishes (verses 8, 12), instructs (verse 9), recommends policy (verse 10), and provides for personal relations (verses 12, 13). One significant insight attaches to these observations. The Presbyter’s authority appears synonymous with, rather than independent of, the religious life and belief of the community. No appeals are made to private revelation, privileged position, superior spirituality, access to independent tradition, or specialized interpretations. The Presbyter simply brings to consciousness the authority already recognized within the group.

Consider, for example, the role modeling function evident in verse one. The Presbyter presents himself a model of what will later be commanded. He states, “whom I love in truth” (verse 1b). Note, however, that his example is not solitary: “and not only I but also all who know the truth” (verse 1c). Grammatically, both actions, that of the Presbyter, and that of others, are justified “because [dia] of the truth that dwells in us” (verse 2). An examination of this and several other authoritative functions indicates that the Presbyter enjoys no more authority than that which is the property of the group. This understanding lends insight to the analysis of the remaining categories in this section.

Truth and Religious Experience

Truth is a comprehensive cipher for the whole of Johannine teaching. Houlden (1973) suggests that it is a community catchphrase (p. 151). It brings together whatever may have been systematized in Johannine teaching into one word. As such, it reflects the authority of Johannine Christianity much like a prism depending upon the angle of any given context. In 2 John truth is used five times. In each occurrence it is associated with the religious experience of the adherents (e.g., loving [verse 1]; knowing [verse 1]; accommodating [verse 2]; appropriating [verse 3]; and walking [verse 4]). Hence, truth is “the sphere in which Christians live, act, and are related” (Alexander, 1962, p. 147). It conveys a mutually recognized and a mutually appropriated authority for Johannine thought and practice. It comprehends the commandment from the beginning (verse 5a), the requirement to love one another (verse 5b), and the necessity to properly acknowledge Jesus (verse 7). It is synonymous with the teaching of Christ (verse 9). It, therefore, is utilized in 2 John to legitimate the view of the author and his adherents and to make evident the illegitimacy of the view of the opponents.

The Commandment from the Beginning

The concepts of truth and commandment reinforce each other. As stated above the notion of truth would include commandment. But, surprisingly, verse 4 indicates that the exhortation to walk in truth (which includes the commandment) is itself “commanded by the Father.” Two insights emerge here. First, the notion of commandment is utilized to reinforce the notion of truth just as much as the notion of truth legitimates the commandment. Second, the commandment is given “by the Father.” More is involved here than a simple evocation of the
authority of God. This last phrase, “by the Father,” is better appreciated from the fuller contexts of John and 1 John. Briefly, John and 1 John suggest that the opponents, assumed present here in 2 John, questioned, not so much the authority of God (the Father) but that of Jesus. The tradition in John does indicate that the commandment under consideration (i.e., to love one another) originates from Jesus (cf. John 13:34). But it more properly originates from the Father (cf. John 15:15). The author of 2 John here tactically reminds both adherents and opponents of this perspective. He thus obviates objections that may be based on the mere authority of Jesus. Just why and how Jesus’s authority may have been questioned is a concern for a subsequent article. Yet returning to the immediate context, the commandment just underscored as originating from the Father is also implied as having been mediated by Jesus. This is perceived in the phrase “from the beginning” (verse 5), understood here as referring to the beginning of Jesus’s ministry.

The notion of commandment serves the purposes of legitimation in several and intricate ways. It is contained in the notion of truth. It reinforces this same notion. It stems from the Father, yet is mediated by Jesus. It links faith to love as suggested by the conjunction hoti. It, like truth, is common to all (note the “we” in verse 4). It, like the notion of echein, evokes the covenantal mentality of early Jewish Christianity (cf. vonWahlde, 1990, p. 9) and thus accents the obligations that are adjacent to the adherents’ elect status.

A Confessional Formula

The confessional formula set forth in verse 7, given to specify the content of the opponents’ denial, is puzzling as to its origin. There seems to be no way of telling whether the formula was invented or coined by the Presbyter to suit the occasion or if it originated within the community tradition and is simply reiterated here by the Presbyter. I am unaware if this question has ever been asked. Perkins (1979) questions it as “a sufficient confessional test” (p. 85), whereas Brown (1982) heralds it as “striking the whole range of secessionist deceit” (p. 686). Aspects of this formula have been considered earlier in this article, namely its relation to the love commandment and the use of the present participle erchomenon. Yet a significant aspect that remains to be considered is the phrase “in the flesh” (en sarx).

The meaning of flesh (sarx) does vary in the Johannine literature (cf. Schweizer, 1971, p. 138-41). It may refer to: (a) the physical body, having no moral or spiritual connotations; hence being considered a neutral reference; (b) that which stands in contrast to spirit and is either devoid of, or opposed to, God’s influence; or (c) the earthly existence of Jesus and hence the sphere of God’s revelation and salvation. Meaning (a), a bland or neutral reference, does not suit the polemical context of 2 John. Meaning (b) would be inconsistent with the author’s clear affirmations of Jesus (verses 3, 9). Hence, meaning (c) is preferred. Its plausibility is enhanced by the larger context provided by John and 1 John. Suffice it here to suggest that meaning (b) may very well have been the view of the opponents. That is to say, the opponents understood the realm of the flesh, the human and earthly existence of Jesus or anyone else, to be devoid of or opposed to God’s influence. After all, Jesus himself said, “the flesh counts for nothing” (John 6:63; here citing the NIV rather than the NAB). Many other supportive passages from John could be cited. Yet a case can also be made from passages in John for a positive understanding of the earthly and human as the sphere of God’s revelation and the plane of His salvation. The author of 2 John may plausibly be understood here to have seized upon the ambiguity of the simple phrase “in the flesh” as a way of clearly distinguishing adherents from opponents. The legitimacy of the Presbyter’s understanding of this ambiguous phrase may well have been at the center of the crisis.
The Teaching of Christ

The appeal to the teaching (didachē) of Christ in verse nine clearly and explicitly legitimates the view of the adherents from that of their opponents. A few reflections on the meaning of this term and its context help refine the understanding here.

Didachē is a technical term in early Jewish/Christian literature that refers to a recognized and established body of teaching embraced by a particular school of thought. This understanding of the term is congruent with its usage in John, 1 John, and is presupposed here for 2 John. Rengstorf (1964) states, “In Jn [John] didache comprehends the whole didaskein (instruction) of Jesus and does not merely denote a compendium of individual statements” (p. 164). Hence, like truth and commandment, it incorporates several notions at once, truth and commandment included. A look at John 7:16, where Jesus states, “My teaching (didachē) is not my own but is from the one who sent me,” underlines that the source of Jesus’s teaching was his Father. It has been suggested that the opponents were not questioning so much God’s authority, but, perhaps, the authority or teaching (didachē) attributed to Jesus by the adherents. A Jesus Christ come in the flesh, in the view of the adherents, was one who both revealed didachē and accomplished salvation. This he did through the instrumentality of his human (sax) existence. This existence consisted of teachings and actions, words and deeds. A Jesus Christ not come in the flesh, in the view of the adherents, is one whose coming, significance, and importance, is solely derived from considerations of his pre-and post-existence. After all, John 16:28 states, “I came from the Father and have come into the world. Now I am leaving the world and going back to the Father.” This passage, and others, could be understood to stress the heavenly, as opposed to the earthly, identity of Jesus. But, again, a counterargument can be made from the texts of John. Publications in the not too distant past demonstrate the ambiguity of reading John (as examples compare Kasemann [1968] and Thompson [1988]).

These suggestions regarding the possible and specific adherent/opponent differences presuppose analyses of John and 1 John, analyses beyond the scope of this present article. They are offered here as a stimulus to the reader to review John and 1 John in their interpretive implications for 2 John. The consensus of scholarship is that John, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John are very interrelated documents and reflect different crises in the stages of community development. In brief, it is my view that the Presbyter legitimates his position by distinguishing the “progressive” opinions of the opponents from the established and recognized didachē of Christ.

A summary of legitimation is now in order. 2 John is framed by titles suggesting the authority of two churches. The Presbyter, a member of one church and a likely disciple of one of the early disciples of Jesus, functions as a reminder to the church of its self-evident and authoritative traditions. These traditions are comprehended by the notion of truth and validated by individual and corporate religious experience. Included in these traditions are the commandment from the beginning and the teaching of Christ. One may assume that the confessional formula of verse seven, if not traditional, was understood as an accurate assessment of the tradition since no justifications for its provisions are made. And, although the opponents may have some claim for a basis in the Johannine tradition, the Presbyter neither leaves the door open nor blinks when facing the legitimacy of their views.

IV. Strategy

Much of the strategy of 2 John has already been indicated throughout the previous sections. For example, recall the tactical positioning of the words deceivers and antichrist, the framing of the correspondence with church authority, the reinforcement of one authority concept with another (e.g., truth, commandment, teaching), the balancing of individual religious
experience with corporate religious experience, and the appeals to mutually recognized authority constructs. In this section the remainder of the evident strategy in 2 John will be looked at from a more formal perspective.

2 John is rated as coming closer to the Hellenistic private letter form than any other New Testament document, except 3 John (cf. Kummel, 1975, p. 446). 2 John follows the conventional structure of ancient letters in a relatively simple and clear-cut manner. Conventional structure for ancient letters contained: (a) an opening formula (cf. verses 1-3); (b) a thanksgiving (cf. verse 4); (c) a body or message (cf. verses 5-11); and (d) a concluding formula (cf. verses 12-13).

Some innovation, however, has been noticed. For example, in the thanksgiving of verse 4 the opponents were hinted at, even if vaguely. The expression of joy in verse 4 is considered a conventional feature that normally would not contain any hint of opposition (cf. Funk, 1967, p. 426). This, along with the thanksgiving, functions as a “compliment which puts the readers in a benevolent mood to receive a message which may contain a demand or even a warning” (Brown, 1982, p. 791). My analysis suggests that the warning is hinted at even within the conventional thanksgiving.

Verse 5 may be understood as introducing the body of the letter and characteristically begins with a petition. Funk (1967) notes that this is “an established epistolary convention employed frequently as the opening gambit in the common letter” (p. 427). The specific word used for this request reveals the character of the Presbyter. Two general words for petition were readily available, aiteō and erōtaō. The former is a generic word for request and is less polite than the specific erōtaō. 2 John verse 5 uses erōtaō. The NAB’s translation “ask” does not at all capture the nuance suggested by this word. Greeven (1964) tells one that erōtaō “denotes a genuine request which is humble or courteous” (p. 686). Hence, the “benevolent mood” initiated by the thanksgiving and joy of verse 4 is furthered by the use of erōtaō here.

From the analysis of this, and the preceding sections, 2 John must be judged to be an authentic correspondence (contrary, for example, to Bultmann, 1973). The careful artistry of the letter, its departure, even if slight, from convention, its tactical positioning of words, and its sense of seriousness and urgency, all argue against understanding it as a forgery based on the content of 1 John and the form of 3 John. Further arguments are provided by Dodd (1946; pp. lxvii-lxii), Strecker (1996, p. 217), and Painter (2002, pp. 331-336).

V. Leadership

Leadership is defined in this study as the means by which authority is made effective. It is evident from the preceding analyses that authority is a key issue in 2 John. It is also evident that the author of 2 John concentrates on identity issues for both adherents and opponents. Behavior is understood to correspond to identity. One acts in accord with self-understanding. Distinctions between adherent and opponent identity and behavior are carefully legitimated in several ways. The analysis of strategy indicates that the Presbyter exerts effort in tailoring his communication to recognized convention in an arresting and persuasive manner. Hence, 2 John reflects the exercise of leadership in many ways. The Presbyter provides a model of leadership. It remains however to critically assess this leadership. This section identifies the strengths and weaknesses of the Presbyter’s evident exercise of leadership through the lens of three leadership theories: (a) situational leadership; (b) charismatic leadership; and (c) transformational leadership. Six of the seven perspectives developed by Burchard (2012) in her deeper synthesis and literature review of JBPL articles are evident in this analysis.
Situational Leadership Theory

Situational leadership theory, as presented by Hersey and Blanchard (1977), identifies the integration of task behavior and relationship behavior as central to the exercise of leadership. Task behavior is characterized as a one-way communication between leader and followers where leaders explain to followers what, when, where, and how tasks are to be done (p. 168). Relationship behavior is characterized as a two-way communication between leader and followers where socio-emotional support and facilitating behaviors are provided (p. 168). Effectiveness in leadership is understood to be the result of the leader’s successful integration of task and relationship behaviors (p. 104). The requisite skill for successful leadership is understood to be the leader’s diagnostic ability (p. 159). The chief object of diagnosis for a leader is the maturity of the followers (p. 165). Maturity may be measured by analyzing such variables as the achievement, motivation, willingness, ability, education, or experience of the followers (pp. 162-63). Since these variables differ from follower to follower, or from group to group, no single leadership style (i.e., a particular coordination of task and relationship behavior) is to be universally recommended. Appropriate leadership style must be determined in accord with the situation (p. 165). Hersey and Blanchard identify four distinct styles, or activities, in their theory. These are telling, selling, participating, and delegating.

On the positive side the Presbyter is to be commended for several reasons. He communicates with personal confidence but in such a way that his adherents appear as poised as he is for the current crisis. This is accomplished to a certain extent by the Presbyter’s participatory leadership style, a style high in relationship behavior but low in task behavior. The Presbyter engages in relationship behavior (e.g., addressing the status, esteem, and competence of his adherents) prior to the setting forth of tasks (e.g., adhering to the commandment, properly confessing Jesus, and boycotting false missionar ents). This style acknowledges a moderately high level of maturity to followers and may be viewed as a means for empowering followers for the performance of essential tasks.

He writes as one informed and respectful of the community traditions. In his writing and communication little, if any, ego intrudes. The Presbyter identifies with the group, facilitating a sense of solidarity. A respectful humility is evident in his exhortations. Essentials are in focus and pettiness is avoided. This perhaps is due to the seriousness of the issue and the concise strategy of the Presbyter. The communication of 2 John is simple and forceful, providing clear criteria for the discernment of error and clear directives for dealing with the opponents.

Charismatic Leadership Theory

Foundational to the conception of charismatic leadership is the work of Weber (1968). Weber distinguishes legal-rational authority and traditional authority from charismatic authority. Legal-rational authority is based on rules recognized in a society by leaders and followers alike. Reason or common consent is the foundation. Traditional authority is similar to legal-rational authority in that there is a mutual recognition of rules by leaders and followers but the basis of appeal is to time-honored traditions more than to the immediacy of reason or common consent. Charismatic authority, in distinction, is understood to reside in the unique attributes or abilities of a charismatic leader.

Central to the conceptualization of charismatic leadership are the issues of succession and structure. 1 John 2:18-19 makes it clear that the Johannine community was in the midst of succession. It also seems clear that the current structure of egalitarian authority was insufficient to successfully handle the crisis. To the Presbyter’s credit he did the best he could with what he had. The immediacy of the crisis of 2 John, perhaps, was not the time to fight fire with fire.
Responding to the innovations of the progressives of verse nine with his own ecclesial innovations may have not been the right move at that time. Ecclesial innovations did occur later as seems evident by the episcopal structures recommended and reflected in John 21: 15-18.

From this charismatic leadership theory perspective several criticisms are forthcoming, especially with regard to the Presbyter’s criteria for error and with regard to his directives for dealing with opponents. Several questions surround the doctrinal formula of verse 7. How determinative a rule should doctrine play in Christian faith? To what extent should purity of doctrine be fought for? Does loyalty to past formulations of truth preclude new insights? Is truth static or is it dynamic? Does not our language and conceptual framework change over time, requiring new insights and reformulations of truth? What should be the relationship between tolerance and compromise? How can we maintain fidelity to truth and still maintain charity to those who oppose us?

In addition to these general and perennial questions are concerns more specific to the context of 2 John. Where did the Presbyter get his confessional formula? What was his precise understanding of the phrase “in the flesh”? And, How does he legitimate his understanding? No justifications or explanations are evident. It appears that he assumed his orthodoxy and expected adherents to do so as well. It is true that the Presbyter appeals to the teaching of Christ (verse 10). But how does one know what the teaching of Christ was? One is in a difficult position to assess the Presbyter on this point. The gospel of John, the apparent source of tradition for 2 John, is notoriously deficient in its provision of clear and explicit teaching. Infamous is Bultmann’s (1955) dictum: “Jesus as the Revealer of God reveals nothing but that he is the Revealer” (p. 66). One searches in vain for a developed breadth of teaching in John similar to what can be gleaned from the Synoptics or Paul. One finds only the exhortation to believe in the person of Jesus and the sole ethical command of reciprocal love. This deficiency in the John could very well have been a contributing factor to the crises present in the Johannine epistles. But this narrow presentation of didachē in John does have its appeal.

Kysar (1986) comments: “Just as official leadership developed to protect the church from being misguided (e.g., 1 Tim 3) so too did the definition of proper doctrine (e.g., Tit 2:1). In the process, something of the dynamic quality of faith as trust is lost when it is reduced to sound doctrine” (p. 131). Classic in philosophical discussions is the problem of personal versus propositional revelation (cf. Hick, 1983, pp. 57-55). In the developments from John to 2 John one may see a transition from a personal to a propositional notion of revelation. Each view of revelation has its advantages and disadvantages. The history of Christian theology has witnessed several attempts at a synthesis of these views and it is a noted problem (cf. Dulles, 1983, pp. 36-52). 2 John, perhaps, lends insight to this problem.

It has been noted that the opponents were viewed as and likely presented themselves as progressives. The deficiency of didachē in John suggests that there was need for progress or development in the doctrinal breadth of Johannine teaching. The opponents, quite likely, had responded to this deficiency albeit in the wrong direction. Perhaps the adherents were lax. Perhaps the response initiated by the opponents provided the catalyst needed in the Johannine community to develop more articulately its theology and to respond to its deficiencies. For that the opponents should be thanked. But it is a matter of discernment as to whether or not their response was in continuity with the original message of Jesus. And it is also a matter of judgment as to how the Presbyter treats his opponents. Dodd (1946) suggests that, “the writer has incautiously expressed himself in terms which might seem to stigmatize any kind of ‘advance’ as disloyalty to the faith and so to condemn Christian theology to lasting sterility” (p. 150). Perhaps it would have been better for the Presbyter to admit to himself and to his opponents that some sort of reformulation or development of the tradition was needed. It appears from the confessional formula of verse 7 that sanction was given to a particular interpretation of the Johannine tradition. One can only speculate as to how this sanction was
established. Was a committee involved? What were the deliberations? Were the opponents consulted or even heard out? These questions suggest that the Johannine community was not only doctrinally deficient but also lacked the organizational constitution to deal adequately with such problems.

Transformational Leadership Theory

According to Burns (1978) transformational leadership theory is a process where “leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of morality and motivation” (p. 20). Transformational leadership is understood as appealing to the higher order needs of followers. Higher-order needs, such as the need for status, esteem, and self-actualization, are contrasted with lower-level needs, such as the need for safety, security, and survival necessities. Transformational leadership is usually contrasted with transactional leadership, a mode of leadership that operates within the framework of lower-level needs. Transformational leadership, by focusing upon the individual’s deepest needs, is understood as paradoxically motivating the individual to see beyond one’s personal needs to the needs of others and of society at large. Two main components of transformational leadership are individual consideration and intellectual stimulation. Individuals are treated as important as the group. Intellectual stimulation is provided by enabling followers to see problems or crises from fresh and helpful perspectives.

Transactional leadership, in contrast, may blandly be defined as an exchange between leader and follower based upon basic self-interest (e.g., work for pay). The two main components of transactional leadership are contingent reward and management by exception (cf. Bass, 1990, p. 220). Contingent reward simply refers to the basic exchange between leader and follower where reward is contingent upon the performance of a task. Management by exception refers to the lack of interference in task performance by a leader except when the basic task is not being accomplished.

These features of transformational and transactional leadership theory can now be applied to 2 John.

The policy established in verse 10, mandating a boycott on the missionary enterprise of the opponents, is subject to criticism. A consideration of the context of verse 10 aids an understanding of subsequent criticism. 2 John 10 states, “If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him in your house or even greet him.” The word “house” (oikos) needs clarification. It should be understood to refer not so much to an individual’s private dwelling, as to the place where the church met for liturgy (cf. Michel, 1967, pp. 131-32). The reception and greeting of opponents would be considered a tacit admission that they were brothers or sisters in Christ.

Was the Presbyter attempting to protect adherents from contamination? Do not policies of isolation, insulation, and indoctrination tend to breed narrow-mindedness? Is not a boycott policy an admission of weakness, a failure of courageous nerve to meet lovingly and tolerantly with those who differ? Dodd (1946) suggests, “We may similarly decline to accept the Presbyter’s ruling here as a sufficient guide to Christian conduct” (p. 152). The history of religion indicates that what in one situation begins as a boycott may in another situation, especially in light of newly acquired temporal power, lend itself to persecution (cf. Nigosian, 1990, p. 509). Holland (1990) provides a timely consideration to the discussion here: “There is a time to preserve tradition, a time for reform, and a time for basic transformation. But which time is it in the history of our social system? This question is one of discernment” (p. 45).

It is difficult to discern, given the required amount of speculation needed to reconstruct the particulars of the Johannine community, if the Presbyter’s advice was timely and appropriate, transformational or transactional. Nevertheless, the analysis here suggests a need
for caution to those who would simply lift off the page, so to speak, a boycott policy whenever conflict arises.

In summary, 2 John as a case study contributes to an understanding of leadership. The contrasting portraits of adherents and opponents set boundaries for self-identity, adherence to group norms, and ongoing development. The bases for adherent/opponent distinctions were carefully legitimated in terms of the primary authorities referred to. A conscious strategy was identified. The Presbyter of 2 John intended, by the calculations of his strategy, to make his notion of authority effective for his adherents. In his exercise of leadership there is much to recommend and to emulate. Yet there are also reasons for pause, reflection and discernment. Situational, charismatic, and transformational leadership theories illumine the activities of the Presbyter yet further study and refinement is anticipated from this pioneering study.

References


