

Notes on 3 John

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Introduction

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Third John is probably the most personal letter in the New Testament. Most of the epistles originally went, of course, to churches or groups of Christians. First and 2 John are both of this type. The Pastoral Epistles, while sent to specific individuals, namely, Timothy and Titus, were obviously written with a wide circulation in mind as well. Philemon, too, gives evidence that Paul intended its recipient to share it with the church that met in his house. Third John also has universal value, and the early Christians recognized that it would benefit the whole Christian church. However the content of this letter is very personal.

" . . . 3 John shows independence from epistolary conventions found elsewhere in the NT (including 2 John), and conforms most closely to the secular pattern of letter-writing in the first century A.D. . . . In 3 John this includes a greeting with a health-wish; and expression of joy at news of the addressee's welfare; the body of the letter, containing the promise of another epistle; and, at the close, greetings to and from mutual friends (cf. the papyri)."¹

The author was evidently the Apostle John who identified himself as "the elder" here (v. 1) as he did in 2 John. The striking similarity in content, style, and terminology in these two epistles confirms the ancient tradition that John wrote both of them.

Since there is no internal evidence concerning where Gaius lived most interpreters have placed him in the Roman province of Asia, the most probable destination of 1 and 2 John. His name was a common one in the Greek world.

The process of establishing a date for the writing of 3 John has been deductive as well. Probably John wrote this epistle about the same time he wrote 1 and 2 John, A.D. 90-95, and from Ephesus.

MESSAGE²

Third John and 2 John deal with two sides of the same issue, namely the relationship of the truth and Christian love. In 2 John the writer stressed the importance of the truth. In 3

¹Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, p. 342.

²Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:176-193.

John he stressed the importance of love. Second John is more general in that it deals with ideas. Third John is more personal and deals with specific cases.

I would summarize the message of this epistle as follows. Brotherly love is the product of abiding in the truth. Let me explain.

John gave two concrete examples to clarify how Christian love that is the product of abiding in the truth (walking in the light) behaves.

The first example is positive and involves Gaius' commendable behavior. Gaius put the needs of others before his own needs and desires. This is how Christian love should behave. It is how Jesus Christ behaved, and it is how He instructed us to behave (Phil. 2:7).

Gaius provided hospitality and financial support for the gospel preachers who visited his town (v. 5).

John approved this practice for three reasons.

1. Such behavior is worthy of God (v. 6). That is, it is in harmony with God's behavior. God provides for those who put His interests before their own (Matt. 6:33).
2. Such behavior is necessary because these men would not get help from unbelievers (v. 7). We should not expect the unsaved to support God's work. If they don't believe the gospel, why would they want to support its propagation?
3. Such behavior makes the supporter a partner with the preacher (v. 8). We really have a share in the work that others do by supporting them materially.

The second example is negative and involves Diotrephes' contemptible behavior. Diotrephes put his personal desires and needs before the needs of others. This is how Christian love should not behave.

The root problem with Diotrephes' behavior was pride, self-centeredness (v. 9). This is the opposite of how Jesus Christ behaved and how He taught us to act.

The fruit product of this attitude was three-fold (v. 10).

1. His words were lies. He was making false accusations against others to elevate himself.
2. His actions were selfish. He was withholding hospitality and support because these acts threatened his own security.
3. His actions toward others were oppressive. He used intimidation to force others to conform to his will rather than submitting to them. He went so far as to exclude others

from the fellowship of the church meetings rather than fostering unity among the brethren.

John also gave an exhortation to behave in harmony with the truth (v. 11). He gave two reasons for obeying this exhortation.

First, it is the nature of God's children to do good works (cf. 1 John 3:9; 5:18).

Second, the person who does evil gives evidence that he has not seen God. He is in darkness either as an unbeliever or as a believer (cf. 1 John 1:6).

Finally John gave an opportunity to behave in harmony with the truth (v. 12). This verse underlines the importance of putting love into practice in concrete situations, not just discussing it theoretically.

This brief letter has an important message for the church in our day.

First, we are not really abiding in the truth if we fail to demonstrate love for our brethren in physical, financial ways. We may know the truth intellectually without knowing it experientially. We must not only have it in our grip, but it must also have us in its grip.

Second, our activities reveal our true attitudes. We can see if our attitude is loving or selfish, not by examining our emotions, but by examining our actions. Do our actions demonstrate love or selfishness? This is a very practical and helpful test we should use on ourselves regularly.

OUTLINE

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 - A. Gaius' love vv. 5-8
 - B. Diotrephes' lack of love vv. 9-11
 - C. Demetrius' opportunity for love v. 12
- III. Conclusion vv. 13-14

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION VV. 1-4

John identified himself and greeted the recipient of this shortest New Testament epistle to set the tone for what follows.

- v. 1 As in 2 John, the Apostle identified himself as "the elder." We do not know exactly who Gaius was. Early church tradition did not identify him with Paul's native Macedonian companion (Acts 19:29), Paul's companion from Derbe (Acts 20:4), or the Corinthian Paul baptized who hosted the church in Corinth (Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 1:14).

"It is generally agreed that the Gaius to whom the Elder wrote this letter is not to be identified with any of the men by that name who were associated with Paul."³

The reason for this is that Gaius was a common name in Greek and Latin then, as the name John is in English now.⁴ This Gaius probably lived somewhere in the province of Asia. He was obviously someone whom John loved as a brother Christian.

John's concern for both love and truth is evident again in this epistle (cf. 2 John). "In truth" means truly and in accord with God's truth. Both John and Gaius held the truth as the apostles taught it.

- v. 2 Gaius was in good spiritual condition; he was walking in the light. John prayed that all would go well with him (NIV) and that he might enjoy as good physical health as he did spiritual health.

"He must surely have learned this from Jesus whose concern for people's physical troubles is attested in all four Gospels."⁵

The physical and general welfare of others should be of concern to us as well as their spiritual vitality. Usually Christians give more attention to the former than the latter, however, as our prayers often reveal.

- v. 3 John had heard from others that Gaius was a man of the truth. That is, his lifestyle was consistent with the truth.

³D. Edmond Hiebert, "Studies in 3 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:573 (January-March 1987):58.

⁴J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, p. 120.

⁵Zane C. Hodges, "3 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 912.

- v. 4 We do not know if Gaius was John's child physically, spiritually (his convert), or metaphorically. The last usage of this word is the most common one in the New Testament. In this case he could have been a disciple of John or simply a younger believer (cf. 2 John 4; 1 Tim. 1:2).

II. THE IMPORTANCE OF LOVE VV. 5-12

A. GAIUS' LOVE VV. 5-8

John commended Gaius for his love of the brethren to encourage him to continue practicing this virtue.

- v. 5 John loved Gaius as Gaius loved the brethren to whom he had extended hospitality.

"The early Christian community's deep interest in hospitality is inherited from both its Jewish roots and the Greco-Roman culture of its day."⁶

John's affection for Gaius is obvious in his repeated use of the word "beloved" (cf. v. 2). Gaius acted faithfully in the sense that his behavior was consistent with God's truth (cf. 2 John 1-2).

It is possible that Gaius had shown love "for the brethren and for strangers" as some Greek texts read. On the other hand, perhaps the NASB translation is correct: he showed love to the brethren and even to those brethren who were strangers to him. Probably Gaius had demonstrated love to all these varieties of people (cf. Heb. 13:2).

- v. 6 The church in view was John's church, probably in Ephesus. "You will do well" is an idiom that we could translate "Please." John urged Gaius to continue his commendable treatment of visitors. He could do so during their stay with him and when they departed by sending them on their way with adequate provisions (cf. Acts 15:3; 20:38; 2:15; Rom. 15:24; 1 Cor. 16:6; Titus 3:13).

"The point is still relevant. Christian ministers and missionaries live in the faith that God will encourage his people to provide for their needs; it is better that such provision err on the side of generosity than stinginess."⁷

⁶Barbara Leonhard, "Hospitality in Third John," *The Bible Today* 25:1 (January 1987):11.

⁷I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 86.

"Always and everywhere that man is to be highly esteemed in the Church, who combines firm convictions with a generous heart."⁸

- v. 7 The brethren in view in this whole situation were traveling preachers. To go out in the name of Christ was a great honor because of that name.⁹

"This 'Name' is in essence the sum of the Christian Creed (comp. I Cor. xii. 3; Rom. x. 9)."¹⁰

Early Christian preachers normally received material support from other believers (cf. Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Thess. 3:7-9) or they supported themselves. They did not solicit funds from unbelievers (cf. Matt. 10:8; 2 Cor. 12:14; 1 Thess. 2:9). "Gentiles" was a general term for unbelievers. Most of the Gentiles were pagans.

"There were numerous peripatetic streetpreachers from religious and philosophical cults who avariciously solicited funds from their audiences."¹¹

"Even in the present day, there is something unseemly in a preacher of the gospel soliciting funds from people to whom he offers God's free salvation."¹²

- v. 8 Giving financial and hospitable aid makes the giver a partner with the receiver in his work (cf. 2 John 10-11). Since pagans did not support Christian preachers and teachers, the duty of Christians to support them was even greater. Note John's emphasis on the truth again. Preaching the gospel is proclaiming the truth.

B. DIOTREPES' LACK OF LOVE vv. 9-11

Gaius' good example stands out more clearly beside Diotrepes' bad example. Diotrepes is a rare name and means "nourished by Zeus."¹³ John brought Diotrepes into the picture to clarify the responsibility of Gaius and all other readers of this epistle and to give instructions concerning this erring brother.

- v. 9 The letter to the church of which both Gaius and Diotrepes were a part is not extant. "Them" refers to the believers in that church. John exposed Diotrepes' motivation as pride. Diotrepes had persistently (present tense

⁸Donald Fraser, *Synoptical Lectures on the Books of Holy Scripture, Romans-Revelation*, p. 243.

⁹This is the only New Testament book that does not mention Jesus Christ by name.

¹⁰B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. 238-39.

¹¹Hiebert, 144:574:200.

¹²Hodges, p. 913.

¹³Hiebert, 144:574:203.

in Greek) put John down to exalt himself. John did not say or imply that Diotrephes held false doctrine. He only blamed his ambition.¹⁴

"The temptation to use a role in the Christian assembly as a means of self-gratification remains a real one that all servants of God need to resist."¹⁵

- v. 10 John promised and warned that whenever he might visit that congregation he would point out Diotrephes' sinful behavior, assuming it continued. Specifically Diotrephes was charging John falsely to elevate himself. Worse than that he was not giving hospitality to visiting brethren, as Gaius was, perhaps because he perceived them as a threat to himself. Third, he intimidated others in the church and forced them to stop welcoming these men.

"Diotrephes was condemned not because he violated sound teaching regarding the person and nature of Jesus Christ but because his 'life' was a contradiction to the truth of the gospel."¹⁶

"The verb *ekballei*, in the present tense again (literally, 'he throws out'), need not imply formal excommunication from the Church, as this became known later. Cf. Matt 18:17; Luke 6:22; John 9:34-35; 1 Cor 5:2. On the other hand, it seems as if Diotrephes had already arrogated to himself the task of 'expulsion,' and was actually driving people out of the congregation (as he had refused to welcome the brothers) rather than merely desiring to do so . . ."¹⁷

Obviously Gaius did not bow to his wishes showing that he had strength of character and probably influence in the church. With this epistle John threw his support behind Gaius and against Diotrephes.

- v. 11 John's encouragement doubtless strengthened Gaius' resolve to resist Diotrephes. "Of God" and "seen God" are terms John used in his first epistle (cf. 1 John 3:6, 10; 4:1-4, 6-7). God's children do good works because God is their Father and they share His nature (1 John 3:9). The person who does evil may be a Christian, but he is behaving like Satan when he does evil. John was not accusing Diotrephes of being unsaved but of behaving as if he were unsaved. One who knows God intimately (abides in Him) does not do evil (1 John 3:6).

¹⁴Westcott, p. 240.

¹⁵Hodges, p. 913.

¹⁶Glenn W. Barker, "3 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 375. John never raised the subject of heresy in 3 John directly.

¹⁷Smalley, p. 358.

"The expression 'he is of God' in this context does not mean 'he is a Christian.' Rather, it means, 'he is a godly person, or 'he is a man of God.' In this context it is a fellowship expression."¹⁸

C. DEMETRIUS' OPPORTUNITY FOR LOVE V. 12

John urged Gaius to show hospitable love to Demetrius to give Gaius an opportunity to practice love and thereby reprove Diotrephes' lack of love. Demetrius may have carried this letter from John to Gaius,¹⁹ or he may have visited Gaius later.

John gave three recommendations (witnesses) of this brother's worth. He had a good reputation among all who knew him, his character and conduct were in harmony with the truth, and John personally knew him and vouched for him.

"Like Gaius, Demetrius is 'walking in the truth.' His life matches his confession. In Pauline terms, he manifests the fruit of the Spirit. In Johannine terms, he lives the life of love."²⁰

It will be interesting to get to heaven and see if this Demetrius is the same man who gave Paul so much trouble in Ephesus (Acts 19:24). Several commentators have concluded that he was.²¹ The odds are against this possibility since there were undoubtedly many men named Demetrius (lit. belonging to Demeter [the goddess of agriculture]) living in that area then. Furthermore Paul ministered in Ephesus in the early 50s whereas John probably wrote this epistle in the early 90s.

III. CONCLUSION VV. 13-14

John concluded as he did to explain the brevity of this epistle and his hope to visit Gaius soon. This conclusion is very similar to the one in 2 John (vv. 12-13; cf. John 20:30).

The use of "friends" to describe believers is unusual. John evidently wished to draw attention to the basic quality of friendship that exists among believers. As friends Christians should show hospitality to and should support one another, the specific expression of love that John urged in this letter.

¹⁸Robert N. Wilkin, "He Who Does Good Is of God (3 John 11)," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:9 (September 1990):2.

¹⁹Westcott, p. 241; Hodges, p. 911.

²⁰Barker, p. 376.

²¹E.g., W. Alexander, "The Third Epistle of John," in *The Speaker's Commentary: New Testament*, 4:381; and Lloyd John Ogilvie, *When God First Thought of You*, pp. 201-6.

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