

Notes on 3 John

2 0 1 0 E d i t i o n

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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 most 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. Other Gaiuses mentioned in the New Testament include the man Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14; perhaps the same as Paul's host in Corinth, Rom. 16:23), Paul's Macedonian companion on his third missionary journey (Acts 19:29), and Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4). None of these Gaiuses lived in the province of Asia, however, nor when John wrote, as far as we know.

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.

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

"The language of 3 John suggests that it is in part a letter of commendation for Demetrius (3 John 12), who is apparently the courier of it along with 2 John (and perhaps 1 John too . . .)"²

OUTLINE

- I. Introduction v. 1
- II. Upholding the truth with love vv. 2-12
 - A. Commendation of Gaius' love vv. 2-4
 - B. Encouragement to support those who proclaim the truth vv. 5-10
 - C. Exhortation to continue this support in Demetrius' case vv. 11-12
- III. Conclusion vv. 13-14

²Robert W. Yarbrough, *1—3 John*, p. 363.

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION V. 1

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.

II. UPHOLDING THE TRUTH WITH LOVE VV. 2-12

The word "Beloved" introduces each of the three sections of the body of this brief epistle.

A. COMMENDATION OF GAIUS' LOVE VV. 2-4

- v. 2 Gaius was in good spiritual condition; he was walking in the light (cf. 1 John 1:7). 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.

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.

Some see in this verse support of the view that God wants all believers to prosper physically and financially as well as spiritually. However, there is nothing else in the Johannine corpus to indicate that this is what John meant, and there is little support elsewhere in Scripture.⁶

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

B. ENCOURAGEMENT TO SUPPORT THOSE WHO PROCLAIM THE TRUTH vv. 5-10

John commended Gaius for his love of the brethren (cf. 1 John 2:3-9; 3:14-18, 23; 4:7, 11, 20-21; 2 John 5) 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."⁷

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 to" 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; 21:5; 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

⁶See Yarbrough, p. 367.

⁷Barbara Leonhard, "Hospitality in Third John," *The Bible Today* 25:1 (January 1987):11.

people to provide for their needs; it is better that such provision err on the side of generosity than stinginess."⁸

"Always and everywhere that man is to be highly esteemed in the Church, who combines firm convictions with a generous heart."⁹

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

"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; 2 Thess. 3:7-9) or they supported themselves (cf. Acts 18:3). They did not solicit or accept funds from unbelievers (cf. Ezra 8:22; 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 [*sic*] 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

"This does not mean that God's servants should refuse a *voluntary* gift from an unconverted person, as long as the person understands that the gift will not purchase salvation. Even then, we must be very cautious. The king of Sodom's offer was voluntary, but Abraham rejected it! (Gen. 14:17-24)"¹³

Sometimes gifts from unbelievers, and some believers, have strings attached; returned favors are expected.

⁸I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 86.

⁹Donald Fraser, *Synoptical Lectures on the Books of Holy Scripture, Romans-Revelation*, p. 243.

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

¹¹Hiebert, 144:574:200.

¹²Hodges, p. 913.

¹³Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:543.

- 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.

"As a deacon expressed it to me in the first church I pastored, 'You pay your board where you get your food!' It is unbiblical for church members to send their tithes and offerings all over the world and neglect to support the ministry of their own local church."¹⁴

Note John's emphasis on the truth again. Preaching the gospel is proclaiming the truth.

- v. 9 Gaius' good example stands out more clearly beside Diotrephes' bad example. Diotrephes is a rare name and means "nourished by Zeus."¹⁵ John brought Diotrephes into the picture to clarify the responsibility of Gaius and all other readers of this epistle and to give instructions concerning this erring brother.

The letter to the church of which both Gaius and Diotrephes were a part is not extant. "Them" refers to the believers in that church. John exposed Diotrephes' motivation as pride. Diotrephes had put John down to exalt himself. John did not say or imply that Diotrephes held false doctrine. He only blamed his improper ambition (cf. Matt. 20:27).¹⁶

". . . a person like Diotrephes is guilty of usurping a position in the church that belongs to the Lord Jesus Christ alone! [cf. Col. 1:18]"¹⁷

"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."¹⁸

John never raised the subject of heresy in 3 John directly.

- v. 10 The apostle 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 saw them as a threat to himself. Third, he intimidated others in the church and forced them to stop welcoming these men.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Hiebert, 144:574:203.

¹⁶Westcott, p. 240.

¹⁷Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 285.

¹⁸Idem, "3 John," p. 913. Cf. Wiersbe, 2:544.

"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."¹⁹

"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 . . ."²⁰

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.

C. EXHORTATION TO CONTINUE THIS SUPPORT IN DEMETRIUS' CASE VV. 11-12

- 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 like an unsaved person. One who knows God intimately (abides in Him) does not do evil (1 John 3:6; 5:18).

"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."²¹

- 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.²² Or he may have visited Gaius later. He may have been one of the controversial itinerant preachers.²³

¹⁹Glenn W. Barker, "3 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 375.

²⁰Smalley, p. 358.

²¹Robert N. Wilkin, "He Who Does Good Is of God (3 John 11)," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:9 (September 1990):2.

²²Westcott, p. 241; Hodges, "3 John," p. 911.

²³William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, p. 178.

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."²⁴

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.²⁵ 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.

²⁴Barker, p. 376.

²⁵E.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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