

Notes on 3 John

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Dr. Thomas L. Constable

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. The Epistle to Philemon, too, gives evidence that Paul intended its recipient to share it with the church that met in his house. Third John likewise 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 also did in 2 John.² 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 the "Gaius" of 3 John 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.

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

²Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 670-75.

"It is possible that in III John 9 there is an allusion to II John and, if so, then both letters went to individuals in the same church (one a loyal woman, the other a loyal man)."³

"This epistle presents one of the most vivid glimpses in the New Testament of a church in the first century."⁴

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.

"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 . . .)"⁵

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

MESSAGE

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

"In the Second Epistle He [*sic* he, John] condemns heresy because of departure from the truth and from the love of the truth. In the Third Epistle the apostle condemns [*sic*] divisions and schisms among God's people."⁶

I would summarize the message of this epistle as follows: "Brotherly love is the product of abiding in the truth." John gave two concrete examples to clarify how Christian love, which is the product of abiding in the truth ("walking in the light"), behaves.

³A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:259.

⁴Charles C. Ryrie, "The Third Epistle of John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1483.

⁵Robert W. Yarbrough, *1-3 John*, p. 363.

⁶J. G. Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 176.

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: First, 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). Second, 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 do not believe the gospel, why would they want to support its propagation? Third, such behavior makes the supporter *a partner* with the preacher (v. 8). We really do have a share in the work that others do by supporting them materially. Missionaries make this point often.

The second example of brotherly love 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 behave.

The *fruit product* of this attitude was threefold (v. 10): First, his words were *lies*. He was making false accusations against others to elevate himself. Second, his motives were *selfish*. He was withholding hospitality and support because these acts threatened his own security. Third, 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* ("not sin"; cf. 1 John 3:7, 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 (real) 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 the truth in our grip, but the truth 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 activities. Do our actions demonstrate love or selfishness? This is a very practical and helpful test that we should use on ourselves regularly.⁷

⁷Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:177-93.

Exposition

I. INTRODUCTION V. 1

John identified himself, and greeted the recipient of this shortest New Testament epistle, in order 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 this "Gaius" (Lat. "Caius") was. His was a common first name at that time. 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."⁸

The reason for this is that "Gaius" was a very common name in Greek and Latin then, just like the name "John" is in English now.⁹ *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 again evident, 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 (may) go well with" him (NIV), and that he might enjoy as "good" physical "health" as he did spiritual health ("just as your soul prospers").

"He must surely have learned this from Jesus whose concern for people's physical troubles is attested in all four Gospels."¹⁰

"Grace will improve health, health will employ grace."¹¹

⁸D. Edmond Hiebert, "Studies in 3 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:573 (January-March 1987):58.

⁹J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, p. 120.

¹⁰Zane C. Hodges, "3 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 912.

¹¹Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1965.

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.

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.¹²

- v. 3 John had heard from others ("brethren" who "testified") that Gaius was a man of the "truth." That is, his lifestyle was consistent with the truth—he was "walking in truth."

"The best evidence of our having the truth is our *walking in the truth*."¹³

- v. 4 We do not know if Gaius was John's *child* physically, spiritually (his convert¹⁴), 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), in order to encourage him to continue practicing this virtue.

- v. 5 John loved ("Beloved") Gaius, just 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."¹⁵

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 ("whatever you accomplish for") "the brethren"—and even ("especially") to those brethren who were "strangers" to him. Probably Gaius had demonstrated love to *all* these varieties of people (cf. Heb. 13:2).

¹²See Yarbrough, p. 367.

¹³Henry, p. 1965.

¹⁴David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:206.

¹⁵Barbara Leonhard, "Hospitality in Third John," *The Bible Today* 25:1 (January 1987):11. See G. G. Findlay, *Fellowship in the Life Eternal*, pp. 13-20, for clarification of hospitality in the early church.

- 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 his visitors. He could do so not only during their stay with him, but later when they departed, by "sending them on their way in a manner worthy of God," i.e., with adequate provisions (cf. Acts 15:3; 20:38; 21:5; Rom. 15:24; 1 Cor. 16:6; Titus 3:13).

"The words ["in a manner worthy of God"] mean, in a manner worthy of Him whose messengers they are and whose servant thou art."¹⁶

"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."¹⁷

"Always and everywhere that man is to be highly esteemed in the Church, who combines firm convictions with a generous heart."¹⁸

- v. 7 The *brethren* in view in this whole situation were traveling preachers ("they went out"). To go out in the name of Christ ("for the sake of the Name") 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)."¹⁹

Early Christian preachers normally received material support from other believers (cf. Acts 20:35; 1 Cor. 9:14; 2 Thess. 3:7-9), or else 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).²⁰ "Gentiles" was a general term for unbelievers. Most of the Gentiles were pagans.

"As the ark went through the wilderness, it was carried on the shoulders of the Israelites priests. They could not even put it on a cart. God said that the priests were to carry it. And God's priests today are His believers. Every believer is a priest, and you and I are to carry the Lord Jesus Christ into this world today."²¹

¹⁶Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:524.

¹⁷I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 86.

¹⁸Donald Fraser, *Synoptical Lectures on the Books of Holy Scripture, Romans-Revelation*, p. 243.

¹⁹B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. 238-39.

²⁰Findlay, pp. 18-19.

²¹J. Vernon McGee, "The Third Epistle of John," in *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:840.

"There were numerous peripatetic streetpreachers [*sic*] from religious and philosophical cults who avariciously solicited funds from their audiences."²²

"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."²³

"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)"²⁴

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

- v. 8 Giving financial and hospitable aid makes the giver a partner ("fellow worker") with the receiver in his work (cf. 2 John 10-11), and with "the truth" (the gospel). Since pagans did not support Christian preachers and teachers, the duty of Christians to support them was even greater ("we ought to support such men").

"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."²⁵

"William Carey, comparing his missionary enterprise to the exploration of a mine, said: 'I will go down if you will hold the ropes'."²⁶

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

- v. 9 Gaius' good example stands out more sharply beside Diotrephes' bad example. "Diotrephes" is a rare name, and means "nourished by Zeus."²⁷ 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.

²²Hiebert, 144:574:200.

²³Hodges, p. 913.

²⁴Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:543.

²⁵Ibid.

²⁶Smith, 5:207.

²⁷Hiebert, 144:574:203.

The letter "to the church" that *both* Gaius and Diotrephes were a part of is not extant, as far as we know, unless it is 1 or 2 John. (Findlay believed that it was 2 John.²⁸) "Them" refers to the believers in that church. John exposed Diotrephes' motivation as pride ("who loves to be first . . . does not accept what we say"). Diotrephes had put John down in order to exalt himself. John did not say or imply that Diotrephes held false doctrine. He only blamed his improper *hubris* and ambition (cf. Matt. 20:27).²⁹ John never directly raised the subject of heresy in 3 John.

". . . 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]"³⁰

". . . Christians sometimes suffer from others in the Christian community."³¹

"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."³²

"Some forty years ago I wrote an article on Diotrephes for a denominational paper. The editor told me that twenty-five deacons stopped the paper to show their resentment against being personally attacked in the paper."³³

- v. 10 The Apostle John promised and warned that whenever he might visit that congregation, he would point out Diotrephes' sinful behavior, assuming it persisted. Specifically, Diotrephes was charging ("accusing") John "falsely," in order to elevate himself. Worse than that, he was not giving hospitality to ("does not receive") the 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 ("he forbids those who desire to [show hospitality]")—and even expelled "them from (out of) the church." It is not surprising that some writers have imagined that Diotrephes was a member of his town's aristocracy.³⁴

"Diotrephes was condemned not because he violated sound teaching regarding the person and nature of Jesus Christ but

²⁸Findlay, p. 8.

²⁹Westcott, p. 240.

³⁰Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles . . .*, p. 285.

³¹James E. Allman, "Suffering in the Non-Pauline Epistles," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church*, p. 201.

³²Hodges, "3 John," p. 913. Cf. Wiersbe, 2:544.

³³Robertson, 6:263.

³⁴E.g., Findlay, p. 41.

because his 'life' was a contradiction to the truth of the gospel."³⁵

"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 . . ."³⁶

Obviously Gaius did not bow to Diotrephes' 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).

"The lifestyle that we exhibit is a direct reflection of the extent to which we have seen God. If we were to see God perfectly, we would never sin. Our sin is a result of a faulty vision of God. Therefore, the Scriptures encourage us to look at Christ (see 2 Cor. 3:18; 4:16-18; Heb. 12:2, 3), for the day when we see Him perfectly will be the day that we will be like Him (see 1 John 3:2, 3)."³⁷

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 "has not seen (not been in close fellowship with) God," and is behaving like Satan when he does evil. John was not accusing Diotrephes of being unsaved, but of behaving like an unsaved person. The person who knows God intimately (abides in Him) does "what is good," not 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."³⁸

³⁵Glenn W. Barker, "3 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 375.

³⁶Smalley, p. 358.

³⁷*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 2155.

³⁸Robert N. Wilkin, "He Who Does Good Is of God (3 John 11)," *Grace Evangelical Society News* 5:9 (September 1990):2.

v. 12 John urged Gaius to show hospitable love to "Demetrius," in order to give Gaius an opportunity to practice love and thereby reprove Diotrophes' lack of love. Demetrius may have carried this letter from John to Gaius.³⁹ Or he may have visited Gaius later. He may have been one of the controversial itinerant preachers.⁴⁰ His name, like that of Gaius, was a common one at this time.⁴¹

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

"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."⁴²

"The objective Truth of God, which is the divine rule of the walk of all believers, gives a good testimony to him who really walks in the truth."⁴³

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.⁴⁴ The odds are against this possibility, however, 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 perhaps somewhat shortly, as he did, in order 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 expressions of love that John urged in this letter.

³⁹Westcott, p. 241; Hodges, "3 John," p. 911.

⁴⁰William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, p. 178.

⁴¹Findlay, p. 39.

⁴²Barker, p. 376.

⁴³Alford, 4:527.

⁴⁴E.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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