

3 JOHN

INTRODUCTION

The ancient tradition that the apostle John was the writer is impossible of refutation; and the teachings in all three of them are so characteristically of John that no other theory of authorship has ever been able to command itself to discerning students of the word of God.

The third epistle is addressed to Gaius. John Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, p. 914, wrote, “Gaius here was “probably the Gaius of Romans 16:23;” but the majority of scholars do not agree with this since it is by no means certain.

3rd John was intended to be more than merely a personal letter, as indicated by the indictment of Diotrophes. The leadership of the church to which John wrote was disputed, due to the evil domination of Diotrophes; and probably accounted for this letter’s being sent to Gaius.

Like 2nd John, and other brief portions of the New Testament, this letter is a precious gem. It gives a clear and concise picture of church life in the age of the apostles; and, sure enough, things were not ideal, even then. Human selfishness and ambition had been asserted to the extent of breaking the fellowship; and there were those who flouted even the authority of the apostles.

Unlike 2nd John, this letter falls naturally into four divisions:

- (1) salutation, greeting, and encouragement of Gaius (verses 1-4),
- (2) commendation of Gaius’ hospitality (verses 5-8),
- (3) the arrogance of Diotrophes (verses 9-10), and
- (4) the moral exhortation (verses 11-12). The word “beloved” was used by John to mark the beginning of these divisions in (verses 2, 5 and 11.)

It was Diotrophes who had evidently usurped the authority of the elders. Both 2nd and 3rd John are directed to the question of hospitality, the second warning of the instances when it should be denied, and the 3rd commending

Gaius for extending it. It is clear that the persons entertained by Gaius were in a sense “missionaries” although they are not called that. The error of Diotrophes does not appear to have been doctrinal, at all, but purely personal arrogance and administrative conceit.

CHAPTER 1

Verse 1

“The elder to the beloved Gaius . . .” It is impossible to make any positive identification of this man with any of the four other persons of the same name mentioned in the New Testament. Nothing whatever is known of this man, except that which may be supposed or surmised from what is written in this letter.

“The beloved . . .” This expression is personal and intimate.

“Whom I love in truth . . .” is a broad greeting much like, “in Christian love,” and carries nothing of the personal intensity conveyed by the “the beloved.”

“In truth . . .” Of this expression A. Plummer, *Pulpit Commentary*, Vol. 22, 3rd John, p. 1, wrote, “We have to notice the characteristic repetition of the word “truth” which occurs four times in the first four verses . . . “to walk in the truth” is nothing less than to follow in the footsteps of the Lord.

Verse 2

“Beloved . . .” John R. W. Stott, *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*, Vol. 19, p. 218, wrote, “Three of the first eleven words with which the Epistle opens refers to love.”

”That in all respects you may prosper . . .” Here the apostle prayed for the prosperity of Gaius and from this it is clearly not wrong for Christians to pray for prosperity; however, the qualifier should be carefully noted, “As your soul prospers!” The prosperity of the soul is paramount. Truly Christian people need prosperity that they may be able, as Gaius was, to dispense hospitality, aid good

causes, and to prevent themselves from becoming burdens upon the backs of other people.

“And be in good health . . .” Good health is likewise a blessing which Christians are privileged to pray for; because without good health, Christian service must necessarily be curtailed or abandoned.

Verse 3

“When brethren came . . .” Charles N. Ryrie, *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, New Testament, p. 1036, wrote, “Present tense indicates that not on one occasion, but on several, reports came.”

“And bore witness to your truth . . .” This refers to the enthusiastic reports of travelling missionaries in their appearances in various congregations where they were privileged to speak, (verse 6). “Witnessing” of this kind was done by the apostles themselves when they reported to “sponsoring” congregations that sent them out.

“My children, walking in the truth . . .” *Truth* in the apostolic age, was almost a technical term meaning “the faith,” “the doctrine of Christ,” or “the true religion.”

The primitive church knew the truth; they loved the truth. With regard to the great basics of Christianity, one must indeed *know them* before he can even become a Christian.

Verse 4

“I have no greater joy . . .” The word “greater” here, in the Greek is, “a double comparative as *betterer* would be in English.

“My children walking in the truth . . .” John’s writing as “the elder” to congregations and persons over whom he had spiritual oversight was fully justified in this usage, whether or not he had converted all of his charges.

“Walking in the truth . . .” What does this mean? F. F. Bruce, *Answers to Questions*, p. 134, wrote, “The truth” is Christianity in its fullness; when one who professes allegiance to Christianity lives a life in conformity with his profession then, he does not merely pay lip-service to the truth but “walks in the

truth.” In effect, walking in the truth is the same thing as “walking in the light.”
(1 John 1:7)

Verse 5

“Beloved . . .” Note the transition to the section praising Gaius for his hospitality.

“You are acting faithfully . . .” What is in view here is the marvelous hospitality of Gaius extended to traveling brethren who were spreading the gospel; and the word “strangers” shows that he did not merely entertain those with whom he was personally acquainted. There were good solid reasons why traveling preachers of that day depended upon faithful brethren such as Gaius for their maintenance. The scarcity of inns, the disreputable character of such inns as were available, and the general poverty of many Christians contributed to this necessity.

Verse 6

One may glimpse the enthusiasm and excitement of 1st century evangelism in the thought here.

“Send them on their way . . .” Amos N. Wilder, *op. cit.*, p. 310, wrote, “The Greek words used here imply not only good wishes, but material support.” The New Testament custom of congregations accompanying such travelers a part of the way upon their departure is glimpsed again and again in the account of Paul’s travels in Acts.

“In a manner worthy of God . . .” indicates that Gaius was to go on the whole way in his hospitality. J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*, p. 175, wrote, “It meant, to help one’s journey with food, money, by arranging companions, and providing meals of travel.”

John R. W. Stott, *op. cit.*, p. 222, went so far as to declare that, “They set forward on their journey” was somewhat of “a technical term of early Christian missions, implying the assumption of financial responsibility for departing missionaries.”

Verse 7

In this and the following verse, there are three clear reasons why missionaries should be supported.

- (1) What they are doing is for the glory of the precious name (the name of Christ).
- (2) They were not taking up collections among heathen populations where they preached.
- (3) When such people are aided, their helpers become fellow-workers with them, thus sharing in the rewards of their labors. (verse 8)

“For the sake of the Name . . .” The holy name of Jesus Christ stood for everything that Christians held dear; and the missionaries John was pleading for had forsaken everything for the privilege of preaching it to others.

“Accepting nothing from the Gentiles . . .” Harvey J. S. Blaney, *Beacon Bible Commentary*, Vol 10, p. 415, noted that this does not mean that, “The Gentiles offered help which these brethren refused; but that they did not ask them for help.” R. W. Orr, *A New Testament Commentary*, p. 624, wrote, “They went forth from the heathen taking nothing, that is, in becoming Christians, and more particularly preachers, they surrendered rights of ownership and of inheritance in their heathen families.”

Verse 8

John has built up the case here to show how important it was for such men to be aided, thus pointing up the sinful nature of Diotrophes’ actions in shutting his doors against them and blocking the efforts anyone else might have been willing to make on their behalf.

Verse 9

“I wrote something to the church . . .” Presumably, John had written to the church to which both Gaius and Diotrophes belonged; but as there were usually household churches in every city, they might have belonged to different groups with the church in the larger sense. The letter mentioned here has not come down to us, perhaps being destroyed by Diotrophes.

“But Diotrophes . . .” nothing is known of this character except what is stated in these two verses. John R. W. Stott, op. cit., p. 225, wrote, “The name *Diotrophes* is very rare, meaning *Zeus-reared nurseling of Zeus*, and was only to be found in noble and ancient families.” This suggests that he might have been wealthy or of high social standing. He was proud, arrogant and insensitive.

“Does not accept what we say . . .” It is likely that John here used “us in the sense of the apostles; for it was apostolic authority that Diotrophes rejected.

“Who loves to be first among them . . .” This prideful and arrogant attitude of Diotrophes was the sin which disturbed the church to which the apostle wrote: but commentators, in some instances, cannot allow that this was the trouble. No!

They believe that, “Diotrophes’ radical intransigence was due . . . to theological partisanship.” (Amos N. Wilder, op. cit., p.311) John R. W. Stott, op. cit., p. 1719, wrote, “Diotrophes could have been an elder who was determined to champion the autonomy of the local church.” All such evaluations of the root of the trouble are based upon blindness to the sin of Diotrophes (the true cause of the trouble) which John specifically mentioned. Robert Law, International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, p. 1719, wrote, “Pride was his sin . . . and a violent jealousy.

Let us take a closer look at:

THE SIN OF DIOTROPHEs

It was through pride that Satan fell. It leads the procession of the things God hates. (Proverbs 6:16f) Fellowship within the sacred fold of the church itself cannot prevail where the poison ivy of pride is enthroned. The spirit of Diotrophes not only rejected the authority of an apostle, arrogantly turned away the Lord’s missionaries from his gates, and slandered the apostle who sat next to Jesus, and leaned upon His breast; but it in time placed a Diotrophes in the saddle of authority in every urban community on earth (in the rise of metropolitan bishops), and at last repudiated the word of all the apostle, making a man to be the head on earth of the universal church! Yes indeed, as Paul put

it, “the mystery of iniquity” was already a work; and this little gem of a letter gives a close-up of the very tap root of the spirit of Lucifer.

Verse 10

“If I come . . .” In verse 14, the apostle made this much more definite, “I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face.”

“I will call attention . . .” Amos N. Wilder, *op. cit.*, p. 311, supposed that, “At the same time (John) will refute his empty charges,” but it is a mistake to understand it in this way. What John intended to do was to bring the words and conduct of Diotrophes to remembrance, not of himself, but of the whole church, exposing his wicked conduct that it might receive the censure to which it was entitled.

“I will call attention to his deeds which he does . . . wicked words . . .” It is interesting that “words” here are equated with “works.” Words are indeed works, wicked words being works of Satan, and righteous words being a “work of faith.” Since it is supposed that Gaius was a member of the same church as Diotrophes, or at least a resident of the same area, some have wondered why it was necessary, for John to elaborate the works of Diotrophes, thinking that perhaps Gaius would have known about them already.

R. W. Orr, *op. cit.*, p. 624, explained as follows, “The objection would be valid only if this were purely a private letter; but there are no purely private letters in the New Testament. This letter is a formal indictment of Diotrophes, as well as a testimonial for Gaius and Demetrius.”

“Forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church . . .” These words clearly indicate an action called in later times “excommunication;” but the manner of Diotrophes’ doing this is not suggested. It is not known if he was “an elder” who had induced the group to take such action, or if he here merely “arrogated to himself an authority which later became legal for local bishops.” (Amos N. Wilder, *op. cit.*, p. 312)

J. W. Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 178, also noted in this context that, “The Greek makes it plain that it was the members of the church who wanted to practice

this virtue (of receiving the missionaries into their homes and supporting them) who were put out of the church (by Diotrophes).

This clearly indicates Diotrophes' action as being a vicious secondary boycott of every Christian who would not receive and honor his dictum that the missionaries should be turned away. He not only disfellowshipped and rejected the missionaries, he went far beyond this and disfellowshipped (even to the extent of denying them membership in the body of Christ) everyone who would not follow his lead in this matter.

However Diotrophes might have accomplished his evil design, he had utterly no right to any such authority; and the granting of it at a later period of church history to "bishops" was likewise sinful, anti-Christian, and diabolical. It is a hopeless blindness indeed that fails to discern the heinous nature of the sin of Diotrophes.

Verse 11

W. M. Sinclair, *Ellicott's Bible Commentary*, Vol. VIII, p. 501, observed in this connection that there might have been many human considerations which would have encouraged Gaius to follow the lead of Diotrophes. "Peace, good fellowship, popular example, the dislike of singularity, and the indolent indifference which ordinary men feel for truth and right"—all such things would have entered into the minds of men as reasons why they should have followed Diotrophes. Besides that, any action, no matter how wrong, which could be made the excuse for shirking plain Christian duty, like that of helping the missionaries, would be bound to have its appeal. Sinclair, *Ibid.*, wrote, "But the difference between right and wrong is eternal and irreconcilable." John here made the loving appeal to true Christians that they should imitate good conduct, not bad.

Verse 12

"Demetrius . . ." Nothing is certainly known of this man except what is written here. Another Demetrius is mentioned as the mob leader in Acts 19:24; but, as a rule, scholars do not identify the two as being the same man. James William Russell, *Compact Commentary on the New Testament*, p. 610, declared

flatly, “He was not the Demetrius of Acts 19:24.” However, J. R. Dummelow, op. cit., p. 1062, viewed it as an intriguing possibility that perhaps he was. “Both he and the mob leader lived in or near Ephesus, and there is nothing impossible in the suggestion that the agitator had become a disciple, and that both references, therefore, are the same person. He may have been the bearer of this letter.”

We may not leave this verse without observing the characteristic phraseology of the apostle John who often appealed to his own reliability as in John 21:24.

Verse 13

“I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink . . .” This is a very curious deviation from John’s words in 2 John 12, “I would not write them with paper and ink.” “Ink and pen . . . paper and ink . . .” It is impossible to believe that any forger, or pseudonymous writer, would have dared to make a change like this.

Verse 14

“I hope to see you shortly . . .” It is usually supposed that the contemplated visit here is the same as that mentioned in 2 John.

“Peace be to you . . .” W, M. Sinclair, op. cit., p. 502, wrote, “This was the best wish which the apostle could form; it was our Lord’s resurrection greeting, the internal peace of a good conscience, the external peace of universal fellowship, the heavenly peace of future glory, begun even in this life.”

“The friends greet you. . . Greet the friends by name . . .” “By name” as used here is found nowhere else in the New Testament except in John 10:5; and many have found in this “an echo of the Good Shepherd’s calling his own sheep *by name*, an example for under-shepherds, and a good closing note for this letter.

It is the teaching of the text here that, “The salutation was to be given to each individual separately.” (Charles C. Ryrie, Wycliffe Bible Commentary, New Testament, p. 1038)

The tremendous importance of this letter is seen in the fact that it deals with the prime sin of the ages, the seeking and grasping on the part of evil men for the control levers of God's church on earth. The spirit of Diotrophes still rides high and mighty in the ecclesiastical counsels of the earth, denying and contradicting the holy teachings of Christ and His apostles; but the loving apostle unmasked it for what it is in the glowing lines of this precious fragment of the word of the Lord.