

An Introduction to John's Third Letter:

Like Philemon, this is a private letter written to an individual. It deals with matters of early Christianity, telling us much about church-life and church tensions in the first century; that it manifested its own problems mostly through human behavior (redemption does not cure the twisted of the faculties of the soul [the intellect, conscience, the emotions, and the will]). It was written to Gaius, a dear man in the fellowship who had reached out to show hospitality to traveling teachers (vv. 5-8). Gaius would like incur, if the practice continued, the wrath of Diotrephes, a leader in the church, whose motive for resisting the itinerants was self-centered and his actions abusive (vv. 9-10). Demetrius may have been the carrier of John's letter, but most likely an itinerant teacher/missionary (v. 12).

1. The letter is the smallest-in-word-count writing in the NT corpus and the only one written by John to an individual. It is composed of 185 words in the original language (II John has one or two fewer verses, but more words.) See comments after v. 14.
2. The letter can be organized around four people (the writer, "the elder;" Gaius, the recipient of the letter; Diotrephes, a powerful voice in the church; and Demetrius, and itinerant missionary/teacher).
3. The early first century context of the letter:
 - a. The earliest gathering places for the earliest churches, apart from the temple and the synagogue, were homes, large enough to accommodate gatherings.
 - b. The leadership in the house churches was composed of a plurality designed as elders or bishops (the terms being synonymous in the early churches [Titus 1:5, 7], "elder" expressing spiritual qualification and "bishop" ["overseer" or "shepherd"] the function within the office).
 - c. In addition, the churches were served by traveling itinerant teachers. This issue in the letter was precipitated by the issue of itineracy.
 - d. Some who claimed to be legitimate itinerants with apostolic authority were fraudulent; they sought to destroy rather than strength the churches to their own advantage. "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh" (II John 7).
 - e. I John helps us to understand the teachings of some false itinerants that were troubling the churches.
 - 1) They rejected the idea of the incarnation, God-sent-from-heaven, and of Jesus teaching, seeing him as only a moral teacher with superb wisdom.
 - 2) They instructed the churches saying that Jesus taught that in believing in him we have the method for living sinless lives ("If we say we have not sin" [1:8], "If we say we have not sinned" [1:10]). That Jesus came to show the way to sinlessness perfection, not to be the way as our sin substitute ("He is the propitiation for our sins" [2:1]). They offered a salvation without sin and, therefore, without the cross. "Who is the liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ (2:22)?"
 - 3) The false teachers were successful enough to lead a successionist movement creating new "churches" and deceiving many (2:19) by their falsity.

4. This little letter seems to be dealing, at least in part, with both a defense of itineracy (vv. 8, 12) and an overreaction to false teachers and itineracy (v. 10), the argument being that Diotrephes' manner of protecting the church was inappropriate; that in refusing all itinerants, forbidding others to do so, and casting those who do out of the fellowship he was acting unbiblically. A secondary issue seems to be Diotrephes' motive for his behavior (v. 9).
5. The exhortation by the writer to Gaius, and the local fellowship, is to cling to the truth, the apostolic teaching.
 - "Truth:" vv. 1, 3, 4, 8, 12
 - "True:" vv. 12
 - "Love:" vv. 1, 6
 - "...we ought to support"" v. 8
 - "*imitate*...what is good:" v. 11
 - "...we may be fellow workers:" v. 8

Commentary on the Third Letter

- I. The Introduction of the Letter, vv. 1-4
 - A. The Author, v. 1a

In both short letters (II and III), John refers to himself as "the elder," not in reference to a specific church office, but as an affectionate title for an older, honored person. John had intimate, direct knowledge of the Lord; he was a link to the past and an apostle.
 - B. The recipient, v. 1b

We know little of Gaius except what is stated in the letter; his name was a common one in the Roman era. There are three other Gaius' in the NT: Gaius of Corinth (I Cor. 1:14), a person Paul baptized, Gaius of Macedonia (Acts 19:29), and Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4).

 1. He was a godly man ("...walking in the truth" [v. 3]).
 2. He was a spiritually connected to John ("Beloved" [vv. 1, 3, 11], "I love" [v. 1]).
 3. He strongly aligned with the apostles' teachings ("whom I love in the truth" [v. 1]).
 4. He was associated with a church served by itinerants, though perhaps not the same one as Diotrephes though Gaius knew him.
 - C. The greeting, v. 2

The wishing one good health is common in ancient letters. John prays that Gaius' physical health might match his spiritual health, perhaps an indication that he had issues that prevented his awareness of Diotrephes' actions since John informed him of them.
 - D. The circumstance, v. 3

The basis of John's desire that Gaius would prosper physically, as he is spiritually, is a report that he had received. John received news of Gaius from itinerants that John has sent into the churches (v. 6).
 - E. An axiomatic statement, v. 4

The reference to "my children" may suggest that Gaius came to Christ through John's teaching; however, it is more likely that it is used as an affectionate term of

one he influenced on some manner toward the faith (this is the way it seems to be used in 1 John).

It is interesting that John claims his authority is that of delegation (“from the Father”). Just as the apostle were under God who appointment them and sent them out, so, secondarily, the authority of the itinerants was approved, and delegates sent out by the apostles. The criteria of delegation, in both cases, was “walking in the truth” expressed in love, the failure of Diotrephes on both scores!

II. The Body of the Letter, vv. 5-12

A. The Commendation of Gaius, vv. 5-8

1. The declaration, v. 5

As stated, the early church depended on resident and non-resident leaders and teachers. Since inns were notorious for crime, debauchery, and poor food, it was imperative that Christians extend hospitality to itinerants. A report from some itinerants of Gaius’ kindness had, in part, occasioned the letter. It seems that John is concerned that Diotrephes does not persuade Gaius, and others (“I wrote to the church” [v. 10]) to his view of closing out the traveling teachers and evangelists (“for the brethren”). Also, the “strangers” are likely the itinerants that John had sent out (“They bear witness to the church of your love” [v. 6]. The “they” suggests that the itinerants travel in teams as we find in Paul’s travels.).

2. The basis, vv. 6-8

a. The evidence, v. 6a

Since John indicates that the itinerants brought back a favorable report concerning Gaius, we can conclude that (1) John was an active participant in sending out itinerants (most likely from Ephesus) and (2) the church in Ephesus sent them out as was the practice in the church at Antioch (Acts 13:3; 14:26-27; 15:30).

b. The affirmation, vv. 6b-7

1) Stated, v. 6b

Itinerants that served the churches did so without remuneration; accommodations were provided by the local churches and expenses sufficient for travel to the next church (Rom. 15:24, Titus 3:13).

Otherwise, they were unpaid and unsupported.

2) Reasoned, v. 7

The profit motive did not exist among the early Christian workers. “Taking nothing from the nations (literally pagans)” raises questions about supporting missionaries. It seems that the early Christians would not take gifts from even admiring nonbelievers. In not accepting support from those they sought to evangelize, they were free of any accusation of being in it for the money.

Their motive was “The Name.” The specific reference may be to “God” in the previous verse, the nearest antecedent, or it could be a reference to Jesus Christ.

3. The conclusion, v.8

For the first time in the brief letter John uses the first person plural (“we”), thus including himself. Two points are made in conclusion (“therefore”): that worthy itinerants should be supported and that in doing so they partake of the fruitfulness of service through them.

B. The Condemnation of Diotrephes, vv. 9-11

It seems that John wrote to Gaius after he addressed the church because there was a controlling, domineering person in the church who had not allowed the letter to be read. Diotrephes is as rare a name as Gaius is common. The name means “reared by Zeus”. It often is found in the upper aristocratic levels of Greek society. Unlike Gaius, Diotrephes may have prospered more physically than spiritually.

1. The context, v. 9

The comment that John wrote “something to the church” would suggest that Gaius was unaware of it. The implication appears to be that Gaius was not active in the church, perhaps health issues (v. 2) and Diotrephes was usurping authority in leadership. The letter was not acknowledged, likely because of Diotrephes, and John subsequently wrote a second, this time to Gaius.

Diotrephes was a self-promoting demagogue (“loves to be first”) in the church; he was a control miser. He is not charged with theological heresy, but his morals are to be questioned. He was a man who demanded his self-invented standards as the rule in the house church. He has had a myriad of successors through the centuries.

You could say in Diotrephes’ defense, though admittedly inappropriate, that he was aware of the danger of errant itinerants and he resolved the threat by not allowing any itinerants in the church. If such were the case, he used erroneous false teachers as an excuse to impression his authority and weakness upon the church.

2. The consequence, v. 10

He will have to answer to John for his behavior! The charges against the apostle amounted to sheer nonsense (“Babbling” is a Greek translation literally means “nonsense”). His malicious words were accompanied by malicious actions. He refused to accept the traveling teachers and put out of the church those who did. The charges concern his behavior, unlike v. 9 concerning his character.

- a) He spread untrue accusation about the actions of John and the itinerants (“wicked words”).
- b) He refused to help the itinerants sent by John and the church.
- c) He interfered with those who would do so.
- d) He excommunicated those who did.

3. The exhortation Gaius v. 11

a) Stated, v. 11a

Here is the first command in the little letter. He is to “imitate” what is good, not evil.

b) Reasoned, v. 11b

Evil actions are antithetical to good action, Diotrephes to Gaius. Here is an axiomatic statement, a general truism. If Diotrephes is a Christian, and I assume that he was, being in the leadership of the church, he was acting incongruent to his profession. Good action is a result of a relationship to the source of good; evil actions belie the profession. Clearly, Diotrephes' actions in the church are contrary to truth and love. *Doing evil does not mean one does not know God, that is clearly stated by John in his first letter (we do not affirm perfection in this life by redefining sin [I John 1:6-2:2]).* The issue is this: Is our evil actions a constant practice? Is it without repentance? Is our sin a matter of boasting? However, an uncaring attitude coupled with inappropriate actions may indicate a lack of love for God or ignorance of Him. Remember, John, as a writer, tends to state his case "black and white," unnuanced terms like an OT prophet!

C. The Recommendation of Demetrius, vv.12

If Diotrephes provides an example to be avoided, here is one whose example can be safely followed. It would have been useless to send a commending letter to the church, so in sending a letter to Gaius, perhaps by Demetrius, he directly commends a fellow servant (and likely the missionary team) with the knowledge that Gaius will do what is right and welcome him. John supports his affirmation with two declarations"

1. That the testimony of those who know of his character is commendable.
2. That his message is consistent with the manner of his calling; his manner of living is congruent with the truth he professes.
3. The sending church ("we") confirms that his ministry as genuine and trustworthy. Such is confirmed twice: by apostolic authority in John and by the witness of the sending church.

III. A Personal Note, v.13-14

This note is very similar to the ending of 2 John.

A. Of more to declare, v. 13

B. A pending visit, v.14a

C. A declaration, v. 14b

"Peace" is a common Hebraic greeting. Despite Diotrephes, the house church from which John writes and the house church Gaius and Diotrephes are a part of have a good relationship.

D. Greeting from others, v. 14c

E. Greetings to friends, v. 14d

If you are using other than the NASB, you will notice that the division of verses in this section is different from English versions. In the NASB and KJV, v. 14 includes what is separated into a fifteenth verse in other translations. Thus, the ESV has a fifteenth verse that the NASB and KJV does not!

Applications:

1. We should be more concerned for our spiritual lives than our physical prosperity (v.2). Sadly, our North American culture places more emphasis, and overwhelming

so, on the temporal than the eternal! What if we prayed that our physical health would be as good as our spiritual health? If there was a forced equality, would our physical health decline in answer to the prayer to make a match? Spiritual health is a far greater gift than physical health. None of us will die physically in a healthy state, but I pray each in our class passes into the Lord's presence spiritually healthy. We will obtain a perfect spiritual state at glorification when our decaying bodies will be separated from our souls. In the resurrection a perfect body will be joined to our glorified souls.

2. To share in the support of servants of God is to share in the work of the ministry. It is highly valued (v.7). The manner of our participation is not the issue as it is the privilege in the ministry of the gospel. Christians are a single family united together in Christ to accomplish the task of making Jesus known though we have diverse circumstances, abilities, and opportunities. We give so that others may give!
3. Many churches, unfortunately, have a vocal demagogue now and then. The apostolic witness is that such people are destructive and must be admonished equal in their error.
4. We should be thankful that in every church are faithful, godly people like Gaius and servants like Demetrius to serve them.
5. It is easy, from the perspective of our century, to think that church-life in the first century, in the words of Charles Dickens, was "the best of times," while in ours it is "the worst of times." Churches in every century have had its turmoil. Many arose out of conflict within the community itself, from among its members. Often it arose out of cultural clashes such as the assimilation of Jews and Gentiles into a single community, the acceptance of differences. At other times, it was leadership issues. I do not think the times have changed, nor human nature!
6. Diotrephes is a warning against the danger of confusing personal ambition with zeal for the cause of the gospel. Diotrephes feared the intrusion of false, itinerants (at least it seems), but he went about the solution in a manner that gratified his weaknesses and inordinate cravings. The good often becomes the occasion for the expression of the worst in people! Have you encountered people like that?
7. Motives can only be discovered in the actions that they precipitate. I am sure Diotrephes could claim a good motive for his action (that of keeping out frauds), but his behavior revealed the lie of doing it for good reasons. If the motive is godly, one's demeanor will also be godly("As the root so the fruit!"). The lack of Christian character is evidenced in the lack of a Christian motive.
8. Leadership in a church does not automatically mean that those types are the most spiritual in the assembly. They may be self-centered and greedy for recognition.