

An Introduction to John's Third Letter:

Unlike 2 John, this is a private letter written to an individual. Like 2 John, it deals with matters of church life, the intrusion of false teachers (the issue addressed in 1John. It was written to Gaius, a dear man in the fellowship who had reached out to show hospitality to traveling teachers (vv. 5-8). In so doing, he incurred the wrath of Diotrephes whose manner of resisting the itinerants was self-centered and his actions abusive (vv. 9-10). Demetrius may have been the carrier of John's letter. In 2 John, the church is warned against extending hospitality to unorthodox traveling teachers; here, they are urged to assist traveling teachers.

In 2 John the author opposes itinerants with their false message while in this letter he commends one who has the truth. The book is a lens into early church life, particularly conflict in the churches. Interestingly, this is the only NT book that does not mention Christ, though "the Name (v. 7)" is a clear reference to Him!

A way to think of the book is the four personages, the apostle John being the writer of the letter.

Gaius, a godly man, in the local assembly, who seems to have been prevented from the activities in the church due to illness, likely unaware of the actions of Diotrephes (vv. 1-8).

Diotrephes, a leader in the church, who has become autocratic and highhanded. He is opposed to all traveling itinerants putting out of the church those who entertained them (vv. 9-10).

Demetrius, an itinerant that John commends to the church (11-12).

John, a defender of the traveling itinerant (13-15).

3 John; The Letter

The Salutation, vv. 1-2

The Author, v. 1a

I take the title, "elder," not to refer to a specific church officer, 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, one of the original apostles.

The Recipient, v. 1b

We know nothing of Gaius except what is stated in the letter; his name is 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), the latter two being missionary companions of Paul. It seems that this Gaius occupies a place of leadership in the church (or, at least, at one time).

“... I love in the truth” (three times John mentions his love for this man) which seems to be part of John's customary comment. He references “Truth” seven times, four times when accompanied by love. Gaius possessed it; Diotrophes did not (he wanted to protect the truth and would not allow any itinerants to come into the assembly and was harsh; a good motive but bad strategy). He threw “the baby out with the bathwater.” Creed and deed did not match! He had a point, protect the assembly of saints, but implemented it wrongly.

A Warm Greeting, v. 2

The wishing one of good health is common in ancient letters. John prays that Gaius' physical health might match his spiritual prosperity. Gaius must have been a godly man, perhaps not a healthy man. Most prioritize the physical over the spiritual; John does not. Advocates of the Prosperity (health and wealth) Gospel movement do. Such turn a simple wish, or a general truism into a promise.

It may have been that Gaius' health had caused him to step away from a leadership role. His absence opened the door for another's influence.

The Occasion for Rejoicing, vv. 3-4

A Report Received, v. 3

The basis of John's desire that Gaius would prosper physically, as he does spiritually, is a report that he had received news. It is reasonable to assume that members of the unnamed church had visited Ephesus and gave a report concerning Gaius as well as the turmoil in their assembly.

A Personal Note, v. 4

The reference to “my children” may indicate that Gaius was a convert of John's, though it is more likely that it is used as an affectionate term of those younger in the faith. This is the way it seems to be used in 1 John.

The Commendation of Gaius' Conduct and Character, vv. 5-8

The good conduct of Gaius, vv. 5-7

The kindness extended to itinerants, vv. 5-6

As stated, the early church depended on resident and non-resident leaders and teachers. Since inns were notorious for crime and debauchery, it was imperative that Christians extend hospitality to them. 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 to his view of closing out the traveling teachers and evangelists.

The dependence of the itinerants, v. 7

Leadership positions in the earliest churches were not paid positions. Itinerants could expect food and lodging in their work, nothing more.

"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, not accepting support from those they sought to evangelize (Paul's practice in tentmaking), they were free of any accusation of being in it for the money. Yet, they were dependent on fellow believers to supply their needs.

The exhortation to the church, v. 8

John's argument for help (shelter, a hearing, food, and enough support to reach the next house church) for the itinerants is *three-fold*: they saw the cause of Christ to be more important than wealth accumulation; they would not accept support from unbelievers; and in supporting missionaries, share as co-laborers with them.

The Condemnation of Diotrephes' Conduct and Character, 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 (now lost) to be read. Diotrephes is as rare a name as Gaius is common. His 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.

The moral ineptitude of Diotrephes, v. 9

Diotrephes was a self-promoting demagogue in the church who liked to control others. 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!

The charges against Diotrephes, 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 that literally means “nonsense according to John His malicious words (the distortion of the truth) were accompanied by malicious actions. He refused to accept the traveling teachers and put out of the church those who did. *We have no evidence of the plight of Gaius; perhaps he was in ill-health could not attend the assembly of the saints.*

The exhortation to Gaius, v. 11

This first imperative in the letter commands Gaius to do what is right and not be a Diotrephes (“evil”)! Thus, the verse forms a transition to Demetrius in that it tells Gaius what to do.

The Recommendation of Demetrius, v. 12

If Diotrephes provides an example to be avoided, here is one whose example can be safely followed. Three things are said by John of him: he is widely acclaimed in the churches; he is devoted to the truth; and he has the approbation of the sending church.

It would have been useless to send a commending letter to the church since Diotrephes prevented the first one to be read), so in sending a letter to Gaius, he directly commends a fellow servant with the knowledge that Gaius will do what is right and welcome him (this has the ring of Paul’s strategy with Philemon and his runaway slave, Onesimus).

It is likely that Demetrius carried this second letter.

A Personal Note, vv. 13-14

This note is very similar to the ending of 2 John. “Peace” is a common Hebraic greeting (it is interesting that such is not found in 1 or 2 John). It seems that John is expecting to have lodging in Gaius’ home.

A Final Greeting, v. 15

Despite Diotrephes, the house church from which John writes and the house church of Gaius and Diotrephes had a good relationship. *One sour apple can destroy the not whole bunch!*

Thoughts:

1. We should be more concerned for our spiritual lives than our physical prosperity (v. 2).

2. To share in the support of a servant(s) of God is to share in the work of the ministry. It is highly valued (v. 7).
3. Every church, unfortunately, has a vocal demagogue now and then. The apostolic witness is that such people are destructive and must be admonish equal to their error.
4. We should be thankful that in every church are faithful, godly people like Gaius and servants like Demetrius.
5. The earliest churches, those nearest the apostles, had their problems. Most problems arose from inordinate interpersonal relationships, and the cause was sin.
6. 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?
7. 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 material body will be joined to our glorified souls.
8. Diotrefes is a warning against the danger of confusing personal ambition with zeal for the cause of the gospel.
9. Motives can only be discovered in the actions that they precipitate. I am sure Diotrefes could claim a good motive for his action (that of keeping out frauds), but his behavior revealed the lie of doing it for a good cause. If the motive is godly, one's demeanor will also be godly. As the root so the fruit! The lack of Christian character gives evidence to the lack of a Christian motive.
10. There are more ways to be active in the ministry than being a missionary. The service of providing their needs so that they can do their work is equally important.
11. Leadership in a church does not automatically mean that they are the most spiritual in the assembly. They may be self-centered and greedy for recognition.