

Notes on 3 John

2023 Edition
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Introduction

WRITER

The author was evidently the Apostle John, who identified himself as "the elder" here (v. 1), as he also did in 2 John.¹ The striking similarity in content, style, and terminology in these two epistles confirms the ancient tradition that John wrote both of them.

ORIGINAL RECIPIENT

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, which is 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 that Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:14; perhaps the same as Paul's host in Corinth, Rom. 16:23),² 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.³

"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)."⁴

¹Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 670-75.

²G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 531, believed that this Gaius was the recipient of this letter.

³Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistles of St. Peter, St. John and St. Jude*, p. 577.

⁴A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 6:259.

DATE AND PLACE OF WRITING

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.

CHARACTERISTICS

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 Second 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 also 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

"It has all the charm of an occasional writing [a letter that was written to address a special situation] and shows how a Christian person in authority speaks to a friendly member of the laity."²

"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 ...)"³

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

²Rudolf Schnachenburg, *The Johannine Epistles*, p. 290.

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

"This epistle presents one of the most vivid glimpses in the New Testament of a church in the first century."¹

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 Second 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 more with ideas. Third John is more personal and deals more 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."²

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:

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

¹Charles C. Ryrie, "The Third Epistle of John," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1483.

²J. G. Mitchell, *Fellowship*, p. 176.

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 His followers to behave.

The fruit product of this attitude was threefold (v. 10): First, his words were lies. He was making false accusations against others in order 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 to 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 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, material 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. It must have a controlling influence over us.

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.¹

"The main interest of 3 John for us lies not in its theology but in what it tells us about the history of church polity. The author allows us a glimpse of the ongoing life of the church, the many things that are going on there and the way the Spirit is at work, as well as the inadequacies and tensions current among human beings."²

¹Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:177-93.

²Schnachenburg, p. 290.

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."¹ 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."²

The reason for this is that Gaius was a very common name in Greek then, just like the name John is in English today.³ 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.

¹Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

²D. Edmond Hiebert, "Studies in 3 John," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 144:573 (January-March 1987):58.

³J. H. Moulton and G. Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament Illustrated from the Papyri and Other Non-Literary Sources*, p. 120.

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 he would prosper in all respects, 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."¹

"Grace will improve health, health will employ grace."²

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 body of writings to indicate that this is what John meant, and there is little support for this view elsewhere in Scripture.³

- v. 3 John had heard from other believers 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*."⁴

¹Zane C. Hodges, "3 John," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 912.

²Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1965.

³See Yarbrough, p. 367.

⁴Henry, p. 1965.

- v. 4 We do not know if Gaius was John's child physically, spiritually (his convert¹), or metaphorically. The metaphorical usage of this word is the most common one in the New Testament. In this case, Gaius could have been a disciple of John or simply a younger believer (cf. 2 John 4; 1 Tim. 1:2). Likewise Gaius' "children" were probably those individuals who were under his personal spiritual care.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 Gaius just as Gaius loved the brothers and sisters in the faith 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."³

John's affection for Gaius is obvious in his repeated use of the word beloved (cf. v. 2). Gaius was acting 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 he showed love to the brethren and especially to those brethren who were strangers to him. Probably Gaius had demonstrated love to both kinds of strangers (cf. Heb. 13:2).

- v. 6 The church in view was John's church, probably in Ephesus. "You will do well to" translates an idiom that amounts to

¹David Smith, "The Epistles of St. John," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 5:206, favored this view.

²Lenski, p. 581.

³Barbara 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.

"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, that is, 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."¹

"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."²

"Always and everywhere that man is to be highly esteemed in the Church, who combines firm convictions with a generous heart."³

v. 7 The brethren in view in this whole situation were traveling preachers. 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)."⁴

"Just as 'the Name' to a Jew always meant Jehovah, so now to the Christian—whether Jew or Gentile—'the Name' means the One which is dear and glorious above all others."⁵

¹Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:2:524.

²I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, p. 86.

³Donald Fraser, *Synoptical Lectures on the Books of Holy Scripture, Romans-Revelation*, p. 243.

⁴B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, pp. 238-39.

⁵J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:332.

I think it is unlikely that John used the Name as an atbash (code word) for Jesus Christ to prevent this letter from being destroyed by any potential enemy of Christianity who might intercept it. John would have made sure that this letter reached Gaius by way of a secure messenger.

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).¹ "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."²

"There were numerous peripatetic [traveling] streetpreachers [*sic*] from religious and philosophical cults who avariciously [greedily] solicited funds from their audiences."³

"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."⁴

"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

¹Findlay, pp. 18-19.

²J. Vernon McGee, "The Third Epistle of John," in *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:840.

³Hiebert, 144:574:200.

⁴Hodges, p. 913.

must be very cautious. The king of Sodom's offer was voluntary, but Abraham rejected it! (Gen. 14:17-24)"¹

Sometimes gifts from unbelievers, and some believers, have strings attached, and 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).

G. Campbell Morgan believed that hospitality is the subject of this epistle.²

"In that [second epistle] John warned against false hospitality. Here he commands true hospitality."³

Since pagans did not support Christian preachers and teachers, the duty of Christians to support them was even greater ("we ought to support such people").

"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."⁴

"William Carey, comparing his missionary enterprise to the exploration of a mine, said: 'I will go down if you will hold the ropes'."⁵

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

¹Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:543.

²Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 531.

³Ibid.

⁴Wiersbe, 2:543.

⁵Smith, 5:207.

v. 9 Gaius' good example stands out more sharply beside Diotrephes' bad example. Diotrephes is a rare name, and it means nourished by Zeus.¹ John brought Diotrephes into the picture in order 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 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 and Lenski believed that it was 2 John.² "Them" refers to the believers in that church. John exposed Diotrephes' motivation as pride. Diotrephes had rejected what John had said and/or written in order to exalt himself. John did not say or imply that Diotrephes held false doctrine. He only blamed his improper pride and ambition (cf. Matt. 20:27).³ 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!"⁴

"... Christians sometimes suffer from others in the Christian community."⁵

"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."⁶

"Some forty years ago I wrote an article on Diotrephes for a denominational paper. The editor told me that twenty-five deacons stopped the

¹Hiebert, 144:574:203.

²Findlay, p. 8; Lenski, p. 585.

³Westcott, p. 240.

⁴Zane C. Hodges, *The Epistles ...*, p. 285. Cf. Col. 1:18.

⁵James E. Allman, "Suffering in the Non-Pauline Epistles," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church*, p. 201.

⁶Hodges, "3 John," p. 913. Cf. Wiersbe, 2:544.

paper to show their resentment against being personally attacked in the paper."¹

- v. 10 The Apostle John promised and warned that, whenever he might visit that congregation, he would point out, probably publicly, Diotrephes' sinful behavior—assuming it persisted.² Specifically, Diotrephes was accusing (Gr. *phlyareo*, speaking foolishly or senselessly about) John falsely in order to elevate himself. Worse than that, he was, second, not giving hospitality to the visiting brethren, as Gaius was. Perhaps he saw them as a threat to himself. Third, he intimidated others in the church and forced them to stop welcoming these people and even expelled them from the church. It is not surprising that some writers have imagined that Diotrephes was a member of his town's aristocracy.³

"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."⁴

"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 [usurped] 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 ..."⁵

Obviously Gaius did not bow to Diotrephes' wishes, which showed that he had strength of character and probably

¹Robertson, 6:263.

²Schnachenburg, p. 297.

³E.g., Findlay, p. 41.

⁴Glenn W. Barker, "3 John," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 375.

⁵Smalley, p. 358.

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 that John used in his first epistle (cf. 1 John 3:6, 10; 4:1-4, 6-7). "The one who does good is of God" describes a person who demonstrates action that has its source in God.¹

"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)."²

God's children do good works because God is their Father and they share His nature (1 John 3:9; 5:18). The person who does evil may be a Christian, but he has not seen (not been in close fellowship with) God, and he 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 what is 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."³

¹Zane C. Hodges, "The Third Epistle of John," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:1237.

²*The Nelson Study Bible*, p. 2155.

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

"John's three letters are largely concerned with the issue of fellowship—with God, with enemies of the gospel, and in the case of 3 John, with those who proclaim the truth."¹

- v. 12 John urged Gaius to show hospitable love to Demetrius in order 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.² Or he may have visited Gaius later. He may have been one of the controversial itinerant preachers.³ His name, like that of Gaius, was a common one in John's day.⁴

John gave three recommendations of Demetrius' 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."⁵

"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."⁶

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 guessed that he was.⁷ The odds are against this possibility however, since there were undoubtedly many men named Demetrius (lit. belonging to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture) who were living in that

¹Charles R. Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, pp. 1627-28.

²Westcott, p. 241; Hodges, "3 John," p. 911.

³William Barclay, *The Letters of John and Jude*, p. 178.

⁴Findlay, p. 39.

⁵Barker, p. 376.

⁶Alford, 4:2:527.

⁷E.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.

area then. Furthermore, Paul ministered in Ephesus in the early 50s, whereas John probably wrote this epistle in the 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 the word friends to describe believers is unusual. John evidently wished to draw attention to the basic quality of friendship that exists among believers. Even on the basic level of friendship, Christians should show hospitality to and should support one another. These are the specific expressions of love that John urged in this letter.

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