

THE BOOK OF 3 JOHN

Mike Glover

INTRODUCTION

The Books of 2 and 3 John are believed to be written by the same author and most scholars believe the author is John the Evangelist. The date of writing 2 and 3 John would most likely be at about the same time as John's other letters, between 85-95 A.D.

The language and words used in 2 and 3 John are similar to the other works by the apostle John and there are several similarities in the context between 2 and 3 John with those found in the Gospel of John. Therefore, the evidence of the similarities of the context points that the author of the books of 2 and 3 John is John the beloved disciple who also wrote the Gospel of John, [John 14:15](#) / [John 14:21](#) / [John 15:10](#) / [John 15:14](#). We will clearly see that the same context of the above verses is also presented in 2 and 3 John, [2 John 6](#) / [3 John 11](#).

3 John, is the shortest letter in the New Testament and like 2 John, it is from 'the elder' but, unlike 2 John, it's addressed to an individual, Gaius and not to a local congregation, although the letter may well have been intended for a wider audience. The purpose of 3 John, is to encourage Gaius to continue extending hospitality to travelling missionaries, especially those who come from the elder or who are loyal to him.

In particular, the Elder urges Gaius' reception of one missionary named Demetrius. It may well be that Demetrius is carrying 3 John to Gaius and that the letter serves as something of an introduction to and reference for Demetrius.

The elder must call Gaius to his aid since an individual named Diotrephes, who is apparently exerting considerable influence, has placed himself in opposition to the elder by failing to support the elder's messengers.

The elder has already written one letter to the congregation of which Diotrephes is a part, but apparently, that letter was ignored. So, the elder now turns to Gaius and asks for him to undertake the work of hospitality that Diotrephes has refused to do.

THE TEXT

'The elder, to my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.' 3 John 1

John again describes himself as 'the elder', [2 John 1](#), this term is often used elsewhere in the New Testament to designate the elders of the church but here John uses it merely to call attention to his age and experience.

The Greek article isn't present before the word 'truth,' and so it's a reference to truth in general. John's relationship with Gaius was based on what both had obeyed and it's the truth that establishes our relationships with one another.

Gaius was a common Roman name, and appears five times in the New Testament, [Acts 19:29](#) / [Acts 20:4](#) / [Romans 16:23](#) / [1 Corinthians 1:14](#) / [3 John 1](#).

Whether he is one of those mentioned by Luke or Paul cannot be determined but we do know that he is evidently a dear friend of John, and known for his hospitality, [3 John 5-6](#).

All we know of him is from this small letter, we know as a dear friend of John, he prayed he would prosper physically as well as he did spiritually, [3 John 1-2](#).

John so loved and prayed for Gaius, because he was a man who had a good reputation and walked in truth, [2 John 3](#). We know that he gave John great joy when hearing of his faithfulness, [3 John 4](#). And finally, we know that he was encouraged to continue supporting Gospel preachers, [3 John 6-8](#).

'Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling

how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.’ 3 John 2-

4

Does man consist solely of flesh and bones, or is there an eternal ‘something’ that resides within us? Materialism, both secular and religious, advocates the notion that human beings are wholly mortal but the Bible teaches otherwise. The apostle John shows an obvious distinction between the body and the soul, 3 John 2 / 1 Thessalonians 5:23.

Note the words, ‘even as’ 3 John 2, this is the word ‘kathos’ in Greek, which indicates a comparison. John hopes that the bodily ‘health’ of Gaius will prosper even as this brother’s soul is prospering. There is a clear distinction between the physical body and the soul. The language is similar to 2 Corinthians 7:1, where Paul alludes to the ‘defilement of flesh and spirit’.

The three virtues, grace, mercy, and peace flourish where truth and love prevail, 3 John 3. Truth unites the Christian community when it faces the common foe of falsehood, it’s evident among Christians when they demonstrate their unity in showing love toward one another.

The Greek phrase in 3 John 3, is forceful, and so, expresses great rejoicing on the part of John. In his effort to reassure Gaius that he was doing the right things in reference to the travelling evangelists, he expressed his overwhelming joy of hearing that one of his converts was maintaining behaviour that was worthy of the Gospel, 3 John 4 / Philippians 1:27.

That which brings joy to the heart of evangelists is to hear that churches they have established are striving together in unity with lives that are moulded after the nature of the Gospel of love they received, 1 Corinthians 4:15.

Plummer, in his commentary, says the following, concerning the word ‘truth’.

‘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.’

Evangelists that sow seeds of legalistic thinking will be saddened when they begin to hear reports from those churches they established that they are biting and devouring one another, Galatians 5:15.

In the case here, John had planted the right seeds of love and unity in the heart of a great disciple who was having difficulty with a brother who was lording over the flock of God, 1 Peter 4:1-4.

Bruce, in his commentary, says the following, concerning 3 John 4.

‘The truth’ is Christianity to 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 things as walking in the light, 1 John 1:7.’

‘Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honours God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.’ 3 John 5-8

The faithful work Gaius was labouring to do was to be hospitable to those travelling evangelists who were going forth to preach the Gospel and teach the truth, 3 John 5.

Though there is some difficulty in translating this verse, it seems that those Gaius was entertaining were often strangers to him at the time he received them. Or, the reference could be to being hospitable to anyone who might need to be received.

Whatever the case in this verse, Gaius was a most hospitable person who opened the doors of his home and his pocket in order to help fellow disciples who were in transit. Such is characteristic of those who would be great leaders in the church, 1 Timothy 3:2.

They will especially help travelling evangelists on their mission to preach the Gospel to the world. Those travelling brethren who were taken in by Gaius went forth telling others of the hospitable love by which Gaius had received them, 3 John 6.

When John speaks about supporting them in their journey, he's referring to financially sending one forth on his journey, 3 John 6. In the 1st century, this word referred to accompanying one partway on his journey, and then, financially making it possible for the traveller to continue to his next destination, 3 John 7-8 / Acts 15:3 / Acts 21:5 / Romans 15:24 / 1 Corinthians 16:6 / 1 Corinthians 16:11 / 2 Corinthians 1:16 / Titus 3:13.

They must receive and send forth those who have committed themselves to preach the Gospel to the world. Good leaders lead the church in carrying out this work that God has given to every Christian.

In 3 John 7-8, we see three reasons why missionaries should be supported.

Firstly, what they are doing is for the glory of the precious Name, the name of Christ, 3 John 7.

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. The generosity of the early church toward such preachers was profoundly great, leading to all kinds of abuses, a lot of which still occur today.

Secondly, they weren't taking up a collection among the heathen populations where they preached, 3 John 7.

When John speaks of taking nothing from the pagans, 3 John 7, it's obvious he's saying that they didn't ask them for help. In other words, these missionaries went out from the pagan taking nothing, in becoming Christians, and more particularly preachers, they surrendered rights of ownership and inheritance in their pagan families, Philippians 3:8. Thirdly, when such people are aided, their helpers become fellow workers with them, thus sharing in the rewards of their labours, 3 John 8.

Another reason for supporting missionaries is because in doing so we are working together for the truth, 3 John 8. John has built up the case here to show how important it was for such men to be aided.

Coffman, in his commentary, says the following.

'There are three clear reasons why such missionaries should be supported: 1. What they are doing is for the glory of the precious Name (the name of Christ, of course). 2. They were not taking up collection among the 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 labours, 3 John 1:8.'

John writes to encourage Gaius that what he was doing was a job well done. Those who would do well in fulfilling their responsibilities as a vital link in God's plan for world evangelism must do as Gaius, Romans 10:14-15.

'I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So, when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.' 3 John 9-10

Diotrephes is an interesting character and again all we know of him is from what is written here in 3 John 9-10. He is a self-promoter, wanted to be first in everything and hated authority.

We also know that he was slanderous, he spoke nonsense and slandered and he was very vindictive, he wouldn't receive certain brethren and cast out other brethren. In short Diotrephes' character serves as a warning for us today, 3 John 11.

John here explains the problem that isn't only facing Gaius, but also the entire church in carrying out their duties to function as a church of Christ in evangelism. The problem is a dictatorial leader who has assumed control, and thus, is intimidating the disciples to conform to his wishes.

In some way, Diotrephes gained great control over this church. It is difficult to determine how he gained such control. One answer may be found in the name 'Diotrephes' which means 'Zeus reared offspring of Zeus.'

The name was given to the children of those who were born into families of social status, nobility, or the higher economic classes of society. It may have been that Diotrephes grew up in a position of high social standing.

He was later converted to Christianity, and subsequently, he brought into the church the community respect he had before becoming a Christian but Diotrephes took advantage of the humble hearts of the disciples.

John lists six sins of Diotrephes that are typical of the behaviour of dictatorial leaders who seek to steal the sheep of God by their practice of intimidating the flock of God to submit to their authority.

1. Loves to be the first, 2 John 9.

This means just that, he puts himself first but this desire is completely contrary to the servanthood spirit that Jesus taught, Matthew 22:20-28.

2. He does not welcome us, 2 John 9.

The word 'us' possibly refers to John and the other apostles. It's the nature of those who love to have authority and dominate others that they reject anyone who might threaten their self-proclaimed position of being a leader in the church.

Since Diotrephes had commanded the sole leadership role among the disciples, he didn't want anyone else coming in who might rebuke him for his authoritarian control of the church.

3. Spreading malicious nonsense about us, 2 John 10.

This third sin of Diotrephes is the natural behaviour of those who would seek to maintain authority among the brethren. In order to keep outside influence away from the local brethren, the dictatorial ruler must recruit the local brethren to help him keep others out.

Therefore, he resorts to spreading malicious nonsense in order to defame those he considers to be a threat to his authority, Proverbs 10:8 / Proverbs 10:10 / Proverbs 10:18 / 1 Timothy 3:11 / Romans 3:8.

4. Refuses to welcome other believers, 2 John 10.

Diotrephes didn't want any brother in his sectarian party who might endanger the psychological hold he had over his group. In order to keep out competition, therefore, he had to keep out of the fellowship of his party those who would either teach against his sinful behaviour or encourage the brethren to reject him from his position.

5. Stops those who want to do so, 2 John 10.

Diotrephes controlled the disciples, he had the power to intimidate members to reject any apostle or evangelist from coming to speak to his denominated group. Church leaders who behave in this manner over the sheep of God have become lords over the flock, 1 Peter 5:1-4.

6. Puts them out of the church, 2 John 10.

Diotrephes ruled by intimidation, he ruled by threat of ex-communication from the fellowship of the disciples. Any who wouldn't conform to his wishes were threatened with disfellowship. Gaius may have been one of these members who was threatened by Diotrephes.

'Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God. Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true' 3 John 11-12

John here made the loving appeal to true Christians that they should imitate good conduct, not bad. He at once cited the example of Demetrius, who like Gaius, had placed his life squarely on the side of righteousness.

John encourages Gaius to imitate what is good, for he who does good is of God and Demetrius appears to be offered as a pattern for Gaius, for Demetrius had a good report.

Again, we don't know anything about Demetrius except what is written here in 3 John 12, although some suggest that Acts 19:24, is speaking of him.

John tells us that he was well-spoken of by everyone and even by the truth itself, which means that he lived according to the mandates of God's Word so that his life showed clear evidence of the truth.

We also know that John and the other apostles know him and speak well of him. When John says their 'testimony is true', they are words of commendation, Romans 16:1.

'I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.' 3 John 13-14

It's evident that the situation among the disciples wherein Diotrephes had assumed dictatorial control was so grave that the apostle intended to write many things to correct the problem. However, John possibly decided to deal with this problem personally.

Therefore, he began to write many things but decided that this situation called for the presence of a Christ-sent apostle. If such was the case, then certainly Diotrephes would have been in a most uncomfortable situation in the presence of one who had the power of a Christ-sent apostle.

Sinclair, in his commentary, says the following about the word 'peace'.

'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.'

Peace should come to the heart of Gaius in view of the fact that the apostle was coming. If Diotrephes knew the power that could be unleashed on the disobedient through the hands of a Christ sent apostle, then certainly John's coming would bring no peace of mind to Diotrephes.

There were those in the company of John who was also known as Gaius. Their friendship was more than an acquaintance, they were friends in Christ. John here seeks to bring comfort to the heart of Gaius by reaffirming the fellowship he maintains with the church.

John also knew brethren who were disciples in the area of Gaius. Gaius must seek fellowship with those who are faithful. He closes by asking Gaius to greet them on his behalf.