

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Four Epistles: 3 John

For as long as I can remember, one of my favourite forms of relaxation has been reading. It didn't seem to matter what it was so long as the paper had print upon it, I would read it. I can recall that in the forties, when I was a child, my mother used to pin a newspaper above the cooker to stop the fat or steam staining the wall. I often found myself reading and re-reading that sheet of newspaper. The name of the cartoonist is still in my memory from those days. It was from such wall protecting sheets that I noticed that people wrote letters to the editor, though I didn't know then what an editor was. I still find the letters column one of the most interesting sections of a newspaper.

I also find collections of letters by notable persons, sometimes published in a number of volumes, interesting. Why should the letters written, by a person during his or her lifetime, be of interest to anybody? It might be an odd thing, yet it is true nevertheless, that collections of letters are sold, sometimes for quite high prices. Obviously, they would have to be by a person of note to gain a place in an auctioneer's catalogue.

All of this is by way of introduction to today's talk, because it centres on a letter in the New Testament. As it happens, over two thirds of that section of the Bible is made up of letters, most of which were written by the Apostle Paul. The letter that is the object of our study this morning is 3 John, written by John and you will find it near to the end of the Bible.

3 John is one of the few letters of the New Testament that is written to an individual, as most of them are addressed to churches in specific towns or cities. In summary, its main theme is reception of individuals into the Christian community. In 2 John, as we saw last week, the subject was not to receive those who, in the words of 2 John 7, "confess not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh." There is, and always has been, the imperative that members of the Christian church must be believers in Him. This centres on the facts of His death and resurrection, but also the acceptance of Him as the Son of God. Such a revelation of the person and work of Christ can only be gained from the Spirit of God revealing them to us. No one that does not have the truth of the identity of Jesus as the Son of God, and who does not acknowledge that He is Lord, can be a true member of the church. That seems to me what the Apostle John is saying in 1 John and 2 John.

### The makings of a division

When we come to 3 John the theme changes, for now it is to stop a man who wishes to dominate a local gathering of Christians, in so far that he determines who can be accepted and who can't. It is a sad, but true, fact that both situations still arise today. Some groups of Christians seem to be motivated by a desire to accept all persons, regardless of belief or lack of it. Others are so desirous of guarding a position that true Christians are not welcomed, even to the point of being positively discouraged. Perhaps, I ought to add that there seems to be, in the church about which John is writing, the makings of a division. It is obvious that Diotrephes has a leading position, which he is using in self-will. It illustrates what has been true, time and again, in church history over the centuries, that personalities, such as Diotrephes, who wish to force their own will upon a community of Christians, eventually ruin the testimony.

After those few words of general comment, we must now turn to a closer look at the fourteen verses that make up the letter. A close reading of it would show that it opens, as a letter usually does, with a greeting (3 John 1). The next eleven verses are concerned with three personalities: Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius (3 John 2-12); then the letter closes with a few personal comments and farewell greetings (3 John 13-14).

### Gaius

Any Scripture I quote this morning will be from the King James Version of 1611, unless I state otherwise. So, let us begin at the beginning with 3 John 1; "*The elder unto the well beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*" Straight away we can judge that here is a link of affection, yet also more than a hint of an official action. Most personal letters are for personal consumption only. Yet, it would seem to me that the title "elder" that the writer of the letter uses to style himself, suggests administrative overtones. What is going to be said will affect others. The other element in this opening greeting, that I wish to comment on, is the way that Gaius is marked out as being loved in the truth (3 John 1). This dovetails with the remarks we have made about only true Christians being accepted in the fledgling assemblies of

the New Testament. Gaius lives and walks in the truth. Some have suggested that the statement *“love in the truth”* is here because Gaius had his detractors. The pronoun “I” is emphatic, and John is therefore aligning himself with Gaius, despite what others might say about him.

3 John 2 brings before us the state that John prayed would be true for Gaius: *“Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.”* Is there a suggestion here that Gaius did not enjoy good health? As this wish for good health was a common opening greeting in first century letters, we should not read too much into it. What needs to be seized upon, and noticed, is John’s commendation of Gaius’ spiritual health. For many of us, in today’s church, our physical health has the first claim. Nobody wants to be ill, but do we all want to be in vigorous spiritual health? The actions of Gaius reflected the Lord’s statement in Matthew 7:20, *“Wherefore by their fruits ye shall know them.”* According to 3 John 3, Gaius was exhibiting faithfulness to the truth.

We cannot over emphasise how crucial it was for the Apostles that the young churches should maintain a firm hold of the doctrines that they had received. John’s letters, and his Gospel, all major on this very point of walking in the truth. We ignore it at our peril. I would go further and claim that if we depart from the truth revealed by the Apostles, then we lose our link to the living God. The Bible claims that the final revelation of God was through Christ. We, at *“Truth for Today”*, along with many, many other Christians, do not believe in any further revelation of God. Christ is God’s final revelation, but, thanks be to God, we can never exhaust the richness and greatness of Christ!

From 3 John 3-4 we can gain an insight into the movement of Christians amongst the churches that were scattered around the Roman world. Nameless persons reported to John that Gaius was faithful to Christian truth, and that brought great joy to John. It is important to gain new members into the church, but that is only the beginning. A name on a membership roll is not a sufficient end in itself. The church is equipped with pastors and teachers in order that new Christians should grow, and become disciples and servants of the Lord Jesus (see Ephesians 4:11).

When I was about twelve I joined the Boy Scouts. There I found, there was a series of tests that you had to pass, before you could be inducted into the troop. I was told that the initiate was called “a tenderfoot”. In my ignorance I thought that meant I was the finished article. Great was my surprise, and disappointment, when I passed all my tests that allowed me to be a “tenderfoot” member of the Boy Scouts, only to discover that tenderfoot meant a beginner! If I wanted to progress there were many other tests waiting for me. In like manner, a Christian convert is not the finished article. Alan Redpath once wrote that “the conversion of a soul is the miracle of a moment, but the manufacture of a saint is the task of a lifetime” (Redpath, A: *The Making of a Man of God: Lessons from the Life of David* ISBN: 9780800759223). That is why John rejoiced when he saw progress in his spiritual children.

I wish now to consider briefly the reasons why these persons, in 3 John 2-4, have been visiting the church, or assembly, where Gaius was serving. Obviously, people in the Roman world moved about for many of the reasons we do today. The usual channels of trade and commerce carried some from place to place, and there must have been Christians amongst such groups. Others were responding to persecution and opposition. It could be that itinerant evangelists visited his locality as they moved about in a ministry of Gospel evangelism. 3 John 5-12 would suggest that the travellers were missionaries or itinerant evangelists. Even if we do not know exactly what their function was in the church, we do know the favourable report that they took back to John. There is also more than a hint in the letter that Gaius had met an element of false teaching, yet remained faithful to the teachings of the Apostle. The lesson we take from 3 John 4 is that Gaius was a faithful brother in Christ.

We now move on to 3 John 5, and this time I shall quote from the New International Version, *“Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you.”* The thought here is of the service rendered by Gaius. Before we discuss that, notice again the use of the term of endearment. Where the New International Version says “dear friend” the Authorised Version is “beloved.” Either word would suggest to us John’s esteem for Gaius. Did you also notice that our text states that Gaius served them, even though they were strangers to him? Christians yes, but strangers nevertheless!

We are used to the idea of showing hospitality to those whom we know. The early Christian practice was to demonstrate such care to those who were visiting, even though not from the same locality. This is Christian faithfulness in action. As a Bible commentator once wrote, “The truth is that the saints are one, and that the Name of the Lord Jesus binds all who serve in that Name together, and that love is the cementing power in the Christian circle” (Hole, FB: *Hebrews to Revelation*, ISBN: 9780901860453, page 192). If Gaius could practise that type of Christianity, why can’t we?

It is evident, from 3 John 6, that the hospitality that the travellers received was not restricted. It would seem that the manner of the service that Gaius lavished upon the visitors was worthy of God. Again, this is a gauge against which we can check our service. Is it performed grudgingly, with very little outlay of effort? In this case the local church was made aware of the type of loving kindness that was evident in Gaius’ actions. What fellow Christians think should not be our motivation, rather love for Christ should be the moving power in our lives. In this service of receiving these

travelling believers, the welcome should be as though for the Lord Himself. This is what the Lord Jesus told His disciples, as we can read in the John 13:20: *“Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that receiveth whomsoever I send receiveth Me; and he that receiveth Me receiveth Him that sent Me.”* It would appear that Gaius had learned this lesson well.

3 John 7 tells us a little more about the identity of the visitors to the unknown assembly of Christians, with whom Gaius worshipped. Again I shall read from the New International Version: *“It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans”* (3 John 7). In his work on this epistle *The Johannine Epistles*, CH Dodd recalls that “a wandering preacher was a common sight on the roads of that era. Most of them would be followers of religions other than Christian. Some could make quite a large amount of money in so doing.”

The Christian workers, commended by John in 3 John 7, are not like that. He definitely writes that they went out in the Name of Jesus, but would not receive any help at all from the pagans amongst whom they travelled. In doing this they were following the injunction of the Lord recorded in Mark 6:8, *“[He] commanded them that they should take nothing for their journey, save a staff only; no scrip, no bread, no money in their purse.”* As they went out from one Christian company in that Name they were totally dependent upon the Lord.

That Christians, settled in a locality, could offer hospitality and help to such labourers in the work, made them partners in the self-same service. At least that is what 3 John 8 states: *“We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth.”*

It would seem that, by the time the Apostle wrote his letter, the phrase, *“whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort”*, which we can read in 3 John 6, has connotations of assuming financial responsibility. Therefore, we can now see that supplying the expenses of a brother in Christ, as he labours in service for the Master, is to be a fellow worker. This is part of the manifold richness of Christian fellowship.

### **Diotrephes**

3 John 9-12 are sombre, when compared with the exhibition of practical care, and loving concern, that we have just been considering. From 3 John 9-10 we glean something of the problem that faced the Apostle: *“I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church.”* I would judge, from this, that Gaius was not a member of the church where Diotrephes exercised the control. He was, possibly, a member of a neighbouring assembly. Some have suggested that he was a leading brother in such a church. Many of the questions that are raised could have been answered if the letter that John mentions in 3 John 9 was still extant. As it isn't we can only use the text we have. From this we can tease out some important facts.

- Diotrephes refused to receive the letter from John, slandering him in the process.
- He refused to receive the brethren, and would not allow others to receive them either.
- Worse still, he took it upon himself to excommunicate those who disagreed with his actions.
- What he was doing was a travesty of what he proclaimed.
- The kindness and caring hospitality, that should be inherent in the Christian community, was being denied to a few travelling believers.
- Diotrephes' actions, judged by Christian standards, were reprehensible.
- Due to his refusal to allow others the opportunity of redressing his mischief, he was compounding his errors.

All kind of suppositions could be raised as to the situation that allowed Diotrephes to act in this way. No useful purpose would be served in considering these. What is impressed upon us is the reason for his action: *“He loveth to have the preeminence”* (3 John 9). This is one quality that should never have any place in a Christian church. There is only One who can have the pre-eminence, and that is the Lord Jesus (see Colossians 1:18). Humility, meekness and lowliness are the qualities that should mark the leaders of the Christian community, because such qualities marked its Founder.

We must consider the legitimacy, or otherwise, of Diotrephes casting out the brethren. I have used the word “excommunicate”. Others have suggested that this was rather allowing them no place of liberty, or opportunity to speak. Either way, it speaks of independent action based upon personal prejudice. The real test of a teacher is not who sends him, or where he comes from, but rather the message he brings. As a respected Bible teacher has written, *“the message accredits the man”* (Hole, FB: *Hebrews to Revelation*, ISBN: 9780901860453, page 195). It is the truth that is the test of the man. Diotrephes rejected the teachers because he did not like their point of origin, and because he judged that they were a challenge to his selfish ambition. Make no mistake, it is extremely easy for us to act like Diotrephes!

John did not intend the situation to continue for, according to 3 John 10, he was hoping to make a personal visit. There is no suggestion that Diotrephes was holding, or teaching, defective doctrine, so John did not need to amend any misunderstanding of Christian truth. What needed correcting was the attitude of one who knew the truth, but did not practise the *“truth in love”* (see Ephesians 4:15). This is an error that returns time and again in church history. Why should there be a dichotomy between love and truth? It might not be the easiest route to follow, but the Lord would command His followers to walk that path of truth and love (see John 13:34-35).

That Diotrephes' actions were evil is made plain by 3 John 11. Certainly, the tendency to malign those with whom we disagree in the church, merely because they have a different emphasis upon church government, or practice, is ever present. Here, I must re-emphasise what I have already said, that Christian truth can never change. I am not for one moment suggesting that the church can accommodate all manners of strange beliefs and practices. If, however, we refuse to accept a believer in Christ, whose manner of life agrees with Christian doctrine, we must be very careful that we are not carrying on the inclinations of Diotrephes under another name.

I have no doubt that Diotrephes would seek to influence neighbouring assemblies, so that they would align with his judgements. If, as has been suggested, Gaius was a member of a neighbouring assembly then, sooner or later, he would have to make a stand against him. John was preparing the ground, encouraging Gaius to follow that which was good because it was of God. It would be no light matter for him to withstand the onslaught of such a powerful personality, as Diotrephes appeared to be. He, Gaius, is to look to suitable role models. They are Christians who have received the message of truth, love and righteousness, that was manifested, first in Jesus, and then in their own life. In turn, these are the men and women of faith, who are living a godly life and walking a path that is pleasing to Him.

### Demetrius

The last personality, who is brought before us in this letter, is Demetrius. Perhaps he was one of those who could be a help for Gaius, because 3 John 12 notes three good factors about Demetrius:

- He had a good report from all men;
- His manner of life matched the truth of Christianity; and
- John, himself, thought well of him.

To use another Apostle's words, the life of Demetrius was showing the *“fruit of the Spirit”* (see Galatians 5:22-23).

The letter closes with a few words that demonstrate the intimacy and trust that exist between the aged Apostle and Gaius. *“I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: but I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name”* (3 John 13-14). How we wish we knew what the other matters were that John wanted to discuss! The desire to speak face to face is an honourable one. Too much of our Christian activity is done by via e-mail, or some other emotionless device. How much better it is for all concerned if we make time to visit and talk face to face.

### Prayer for peace

The letter ends with a prayer for peace (3 John 14). Probably the immediate situation would be one of confrontation. There is a peace that is available for all who trust in Christ (see John 14:27), but it should also extend to relationships between Christians. When problems arise they need to be faced, though the ultimate aim should be the restoration of peace and a harmonious atmosphere.

John's last request was for his friends in the church to be greeted by name (3 John 14). This would suggest to me that he wanted the contents of the letter known to all who met with Gaius. My final point, this morning, is to highlight the richness of the Christian relationship. Have we lost the wonder of becoming a friend of the Lord Jesus? This is mentioned first in John 15:14, where the Lord says to His disciples that they are His friends if they do His commands. If we are His friends, then we ought to be friends of each other. This is indeed a high calling. Our attitude to each other, in our local church, is the index of our grasp of friendship. May we all enjoy the company of fellow believers, as we walk together with Him, who was called the *“Friend of sinners”* (see Matthew 11:19).

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