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3 John: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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Alastair Roberts

CONTENTS

00:00:00 - Letter to Gaius

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Transcript

3 John is the shortest book in the Bible. Luke Timothy Johnson has suggested that the three epistles of John were sent at the same time by the hand of Demetrius. 3 John recommends Demetrius to Gaius in verse 12, and 2 John was intended to be publicly read in Gaius' church.

Perhaps this is the letter that was written to the church, referred to in verse 9 of this book. 1 John is less of a letter than a homily, exhorting the members of Gaius' church. 3 John is very unusually for New Testament epistles, a private correspondence, addressed to Gaius alone, not immediately intended to be shared with a wider audience.

Of the Johannine epistles, it is the only one to contain names, Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius. We don't know anything about the addressee of this epistle, Gaius. As Gaius was a common name, it's unlikely that the various references that we see to figures named Gaius in the New Testament are references to this same individual.

There are likely at least three or four individuals called Gaius in the New Testament. There was a Gaius in Corinth, mentioned in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 14, who may have been the host of Paul, mentioned in Romans 16, verse 23. There are probably a couple of other different Gaiuses in the book of Acts, a Gaius in Macedonia, in Acts 19, verse 29, and a Gaius in Derbe, in Acts 20, verse 4. Many scholars have suggested that John's epistles were written in the context of Ephesus in Asia.

The letters that begin the book of Revelation are also addressed to churches in that geographical region. If this were the case, it would weigh the identification of Gaius away from the Corinthian and Macedonian Gaiuses, for instance. Gaius may have been the overseer of a church under John's more general regional oversight, or perhaps he was simply a fellow minister in the region, of a church where John had formerly ministered.

What we do know is that Gaius is dear to John in the Gospel. John loves Gaius in the truth, which might simply refer to a love that is true, but likely has a thicker meaning than that, relating to the way that John loves Gaius in a manner thoroughly shaped and contextualised by the truth of Jesus Christ. The Apostle John has often been spoken of as the Apostle of Love.

As Robert Yarborough notes, this title is well deserved, not merely for the extensive character of John's teaching concerning love, or the peculiarly close relationship that he has with our Lord in the fourth Gospel, as the disciple that Jesus loved, but also for the way in which John articulates the loving warmth of the bonds between Christians in places such as this, the beloved Gaius whom I love in truth. John expresses his prayer for Gaius, that he would materially prosper and would know good health as things go well with his life or with his soul. Presumably John is wishing that Gaius would know material wellbeing that corresponds to the spiritual wellbeing and progress that he is showing.

It appears that believers who had visited Gaius' church had visited John on a number of occasions, bringing with them positive reports about the wellbeing and growth of Gaius and the believers in his congregation. These were most likely travelling missionaries who had been given hospitality by Gaius while they were there. Some of the visitors to whom John refers may have been those to whom John referred in 2 John 4 or who brought him reports of this matter.

I rejoice greatly to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as we were commanded by the Father. It is a cause of great encouragement to John to hear of the spiritual progress of persons under his spiritual oversight, or persons for whom he was instrumental in their coming to faith. Indeed, for John there are no joys that really can compare with this joy.

The life of the faithful Christian minister is tied up with those under his oversight in ways that can exceed even that of the relationship between a parent and their natural child. John highly commends Gaius on his faithful performance of his ministry, of which the

brothers who had visited had given him a report. The brothers seemed to have been strangers to Gaius rather than members of his church.

They had benefited from Gaius' generous hospitality and had reported upon Gaius' faithfulness and love to the entirety of John's congregation. The showing of hospitality would have been a very important part of the life of the early church. They were in a pioneer situation, with many workers travelling to and fro, developing the connective tissue between congregations within and across different regions, sharing gifts, bringing news from place to place, strengthening churches that were very young in the faith, and planting new congregations.

In such a situation, generous hospitality in the provision of shelter and support was one of the things that kept the spiritual supply lines of the early church open. It allowed for gifts and ministers of the church to be communicated effectively to those places where they were most needed. Such hospitality shown to the messengers of Christ is often highlighted in its importance in the New Testament, not least in the parable of the sheep and the goats.

It is possible that the persons who brought these reports about Gaius and his church were going to be passing through Gaius' city again on the return leg of their journey. However, John's encouragement to welcome, hospitality and support of travelling ministers may have been a more generic one concerning future visitors of such a type. The travellers in question, most likely travelling missionaries as we have seen, have gone out on their missions for the sake of Jesus' name and have not accepted support from the unbelievers.

John here uses a word that is commonly translated as Gentiles, but which differs from the word commonly used for Gentiles, being found only here and in Matthew's Gospel, where it refers to those outside of the community of faith. By accepting nothing from the unbelievers, such missionaries depended upon the Lord and maintained the integrity of their mission, which might otherwise have been compromised if they had been teachers for pay, for instance. Supporting such persons is important, as it enables people like John, Gaius and the travelling missionaries all to perform their particular vocations as fellow workers for the truth.

Verse 9, which refers to something that John had written to the church, most likely refers to the book of 2 John, which probably accompanied this private letter. However, there is a figure, seemingly a member of Gaius' congregation or otherwise under his oversight, who is resistant to the authority of John, and perhaps also Gaius and the other Christian teachers as well. Maybe there is a personal dispute between John and Diotrephes, or perhaps Diotrephes is someone who will refuse to accept the teaching of 1 and 2 John.

Whatever is the case, Diotrephes is characterised by a desire to put himself first. Jesus had taught his disciples in Mark 9, verse 35, if anyone would be first, he must be last of

all and servant of all, and in Mark 10, verses 42-45 we read, And Jesus called them to him and said to them, You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them, but it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all.

For even the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. By the description of Diotrephes here, he is someone who rejects this ethos, being driven by ambition and a desire for dominance. Beyond not acknowledging the authority of persons such as John and Gaius within his context, he also badmouths them, spreading discontent that undermines them.

He refuses to welcome travelling missionaries, and also opposes those within the church who would try to do so, to the extent of excluding them from the congregation. By refusing such hospitality, Diotrephes would have made it very hard for ministers to operate in his context. Alistair Stuart, in his work *The Original Bishops*, suggests that it is quite likely that Diotrephes was a wealthier member of the congregation who owned the house in which others met.

By virtue of the fact that the early churches largely met in private houses, a person who owned a larger house in which others met, and in which travelling ministers could be hosted, would enjoy a lot of influence, even beyond that which their greater power of wealth and social status would have given them. John says that when he visits, he will address these matters with Diotrephes. People will be known by their fruits.

People whose lives are marked by evil have not seen God, whereas those whose lives are characterised by doing good are from God. These are the people that must be imitated. Gaius is encouraged to consider the people with whom he associates, and the people that he will imitate.

While dealings with someone like Diotrephes may be unavoidable for him, he must recognise what someone like Diotrephes represents, over against the faithfulness of the travelling missionaries and Demetrius. John proceeds to praise Demetrius, adding his testimony to that of many others that Demetrius is a man of good character. Beyond the testimony of fellow Christians, he is found to be true by the truth itself.

Demetrius was likely the bearer of the epistles. He was possibly sent as more than simply a message-bearer, but as a representative of John in some greater capacity. The ending of 3 John is much the same as the ending of 2 John.

John shares his intention to see Gaius soon, when he visits the congregation again. Then they will be able to talk face to face. He concludes his letter by conveying greetings.

Such a letter isn't merely correspondence from one Christian to another. It is also a

channel by which Christians who would never have had the chance to travel any great distance in their lives could nonetheless be in regular contact with Christians elsewhere in the empire, communicating their needs and greetings through their ministers. A bishop-like figure like John ensured that local churches were opened up and connected to the universal church, preventing them from becoming insular or sectarian.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways in which churches can protect themselves from figures like Diatrophes?