

# **EXPOSITORY NOTES**

## **3 JOHN**

**Gordon Lyons**

# Expository Notes

*3 John*

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### **3 John**

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## Introduction and Background

The apostle John's third letter was without doubt written to an individual, namely John's brother in Christ—Gaius. John had heard that Gaius had been holding fast to the truth of God's Word. The apostle had heard also that Gaius had been taking care of the Lord's people, including visiting missionaries, by showing them hospitality and providing for their every need. This was in spite of the severe opposition that he and others had been receiving from certain members of their own local church.

At the head of this opposition was a man named Diotrephes. This man apparently wanted to control the affairs of the local church, or at least to influence the church regarding their view of the apostolic leadership and authority. Diotrephes rejected the apostle John and spread malicious gossip concerning him. He also rejected anyone who attempted to accept John's messengers into the church, and actually expelled these members from the church.

Such arrogance could not be tolerated among the saints of the Lord Jesus. John, therefore, writes this letter to his trusted and respected friend, Gaius, advising him how to handle this difficult situation.

This letter teaches us of the damage that can be caused to the church by ungodly and ambitious individuals. Determined to rise to high office in the church (instead of seeking the lowliest place at the feet of Christ), they impose on God's people their own personal ideas, opinions and teachings. Even worse, they minimise, disregard, or try to set at naught the infallible and unchanging teaching of God's own holy Word.

The apostle John found great difficulty in making even the slightest progress with Diotrephes, since this evil man rejected John's apostolic authority and disregarded his instructions. Furthermore, Diotrephes so dominated and intimidated the church that they felt unable to remove him from his usurped position, or even to curtail his activities.

Such situations as this may require the direct intervention of the Lord himself, in order to purge his church from evil and from those who would usurp the positions or offices that God prepares only for godly, spiritual and committed pastors and elders.

Clearly, Diotrephes would never have been called or appointed to church office by God or by the church itself. He had attained this position only by imposing himself on the church, by dominating its leadership, and by placing himself as head of that leadership.

In view of these distressing circumstances, it is greatly to Gaius' credit—and also to that of some others, including Demetrius—that he remained faithful to the truth and to the people of God, helping them in any and every way possible.



## 3 John Chapter 1

### Salutation

John, the beloved apostle, opens his third letter thus:

#### 3 John 1:1

This is a very personal letter, written to the apostle's close friend, Gaius (or Caius). Nothing of certainty is known about Gaius. His name appears to be of Roman origin, and was one that was in common use. Other occurrences of this name in the New Testament can be found in Acts 19:29 (Gaius of Macedonia); Acts 20:4 (Gaius of Derbe), and 1 Cor. 1:14 (Gaius of Corinth).

John addresses his letter to his friend, Gaius, whom he is about to encourage in the faith and concerning the problems that he has been encountering with Diotrephes.

Gaius is one who loves the Lord Jesus, and who loves the saints of the Lord. Clearly, he has become greatly concerned about the danger posed to God's people by the example and actions of Diotrephes. Because of his love for the Lord, for the truth and for the Lord's people, John is able to express his love for Gaius—a brother in Christ. Such love is the purest imaginable. It is the love of God shed abroad in the heart of the believer, and overflowing into the lives of fellow believers. The Lord's people have a special love for one another because they have been united by a common bond, and are members of one spiritual family. Thus, the apostle is able to write—

*The elder, To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.*

### Gaius Walks in the Truth

#### 3 John 1:2-4

John begins his letter proper by saying:

#### 3 John 1:2

John addresses this dear brother in Christ not just in a formal sense, but out of love in his heart for him. Similarly, the apostle's prayer for Gaius is not a mere formality. It would be John's genuine and heartfelt desire and prayer that God would grant to Gaius good health; and that he might indeed prosper in the hand of the Lord.

Prosperity, however, does not necessarily guarantee or even imply an abundance of material riches or wealth. God may grant such blessings to his people, but this is entirely at his sovereign pleasure. To some, God grants riches, wealth, and many other physical or material blessings. However, many of God's people do not benefit from such blessings. Nevertheless, God blesses them with an abundance of spiritual blessings, and in addition, he promises to meet all their needs according to his riches in glory.

The NIV translation here is weak. The usual and more accurate translation is, *even [or, just] as your soul prospers.*

John is confident that Gaius is thriving spiritually, and that his soul is developing in the faith and in godly living. Gaius would be actively involved in feeding his soul on the Word

of God, thus ensuring its rapid and healthy progress in holiness of life. In everything relating to life and godliness, Gaius' soul is truly prospering.

Thus, John assures Gaius of his prayerful concern for his spiritual, physical and mental welfare. Then, the apostle indicates how pleased he had been to learn of the health of his soul. John had heard of Gaius' spiritual welfare from visiting brothers. These brothers had assured the apostle that his dear friend had been making excellent progress in the things of the Spirit. Indeed, he had been making progress even in the teeth of fierce opposition.

In the following verse, the apostle elaborates on the source of his information concerning Gaius:

### 3 John 1:3

John was only too well aware of the harm being caused to some of the churches by false teachers. He knew, too, of those who were not willing to submit to the authority of God's Word or to the teaching as delivered to the churches by the apostles. When, therefore, this aged apostle learns of Gaius' faithfulness to the truth of God's Word, he rejoices greatly. This must have provided a considerable uplift to the apostle's heart at a time when he was engaging in the care of the churches, and in combating false teaching. Therefore, John declares—

*It gave me great joy to have some of the brothers come and tell me about your faithfulness to the truth....*

Gaius was not a person to become easily discouraged by opposition to the truth. Although he had to take a stand against those who were endeavouring to assert their own point of view and to reject all apostolic teaching and authority, yet Gaius did not yield to them. He considered the truth of God's Word and the teaching of the Lord's apostles, matters that were essential to the faith. From day to day therefore, and from moment to moment, Gaius continued to walk in the truth. He not only *believed* the truths of God's Word, he also *applied* them and *lived* by them. From this, it followed that he would readily defend these truths—and those who held to these truths—from all forms of evil. This included the evil posed by the egotistical Diotrefes.

John's joy at hearing of the stand taken by Gaius is expressed in verse 4:

### 3 John 1:4

This was all that the aged apostle could have hoped for: just to hear that 'his children' were being faithful to the Lord and to his teachings. It thrilled the apostle's heart to learn of the progress being made by Gaius and others who had remained faithful to the truth—especially when false teachers were opposing them so tenaciously. Whether by the expression, *my children*, John is implying that it was by his instrumentality that Gaius and others had been converted to Christ, is not altogether clear. This may be the case; or it may simply be an expression used of John—the *elder*—in relation to his *spiritual children*; i.e., the flock under his care.



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## Gaius' Faithfulness in Showing Hospitality

### 3 John 1:5-8

#### 3 John 1:5

It would be a great relief to John to learn of the way in which Gaius had been reaching out the right hand of fellowship toward other believers. It would be very heartening for the apostle to hear of Gaius' hospitality toward those who had come from John, or from associated local churches. Diotrophes, of course, had refused to show any kind of hospitality to these brothers in Christ. It was, therefore, to Gaius' credit that he stepped in willingly to receive these brothers, and to provide for their needs. However, this was not an isolated incident on Gaius' part. It was his regular custom—even although it must have brought him into conflict, if not sharp contention, with Diotrophes and his party.

The brothers to whom Gaius had been showing hospitality, were—for the most part—unknown to him personally. He received them and welcomed them simply because he knew that they had come from one of the apostolic churches, and therefore were bona fide servants of Christ.

Of course, it should have been the responsibility of the leadership of the church that they were visiting to arrange hospitality for the Lord's servants. However, because Diotrophes had usurped the position of leadership and because of his refusal to accept such messengers of God, it became necessary to make other arrangements for them.

This is where Gaius was providing such immense assistance to the Lord's servants and to the Church. This, too, is why the apostle John so warmly commends Gaius. Effectively, John was saying, you are faithful in showing hospitality to these brothers *...even though they are strangers to you.*

Referring to the report that he had received from the visiting brothers concerning Gaius' faithfulness, the apostle writes:

#### 3 John 1:6

These brothers had reported to the whole church about Gaius' love and care for the Lord's people, as exemplified in the hospitality that he had shown toward them. Therefore, since, these fellow servants had brought this matter of Gaius' loving faithfulness to the notice of the church, John could assure this beloved brother of the church's continuing prayers for him. God had given Gaius the grace to stand against opposition—even within his own fellowship. John, together with these other churches, would pray that Gaius might continue to know God's grace in his heart and life.

Yet, not only had Gaius received the Lord's servants with open arms, but he had also provided for their needs. Upon their departure, he had sent them on their way with whatever they had needed, and with God's blessing upon them. Such was the faithfulness of one person and his friends toward the Lord's servants. Such was the ministry which Diotrophes and the local church *should* have provided—but patently did not provide.

By way of further explanation concerning these travelling missionaries, the apostle writes:

#### 3 John 1:7

It was because of the Name of the Lord Jesus that these servants of Christ went out to preach the Gospel, and to minister from church to church. They obeyed the Holy Spirit's call and command to make Christ known, and they endured willingly all kinds of hardships

and persecutions. They took their stand—fully prepared to suffer for the name and for the sake of Christ. (Phil. 1:29-30)

However, they could not have anticipated suffering at the hands of those who professed to belong to Christ. Yet, in coming to the church where Diotrephes ruled, this was exactly what had happened to them. Except for Gaius' kind intervention, there might have been no-one in that area who was willing to receive these missionaries and provide for their needs.

These travelling teachers went out in the Lord's name without expecting or receiving any kind of help or financial assistance from the world of unbelievers. They went out trusting in the Lord to provide. They knew that the Lord was faithful, and they believed that his people would prove faithful to their Lord and to his servants. Such indeed proved to be the case. Wherever these men of God went with the Gospel, the churches received them, provided them with hospitality during their stay and contributed toward their needs upon their departure.

Here, we see an example of the church's independence from the world, and its complete dependence on the Lord for its support. This is the pattern that the Lord expects his people to follow—looking to him for their support. Missionaries or other servants of Christ should not receive assistance from the pagan or ungodly world, for this world is at enmity with God. It does not concern itself with the things of God or with spiritual matters.

Therefore, the Lord's servants should receive their support from the Lord and from his people. To this end, the travelling teachers who came to the church where Diotrephes dominated could rightly have expected that church to provide for their spiritual, material and physical needs. This was in accordance with Christ's own teaching, *The labourer deserves his wages*.

Instead, however, of receiving a warm welcome and loving, caring, and practical Christian fellowship, these missionary brothers met with stiff opposition and rejection. Upon their arrival at the church, the arrogant and overbearing Diotrephes refused them entry to this church's fellowship.

It must have proved a devastating blow to these dear servants of the Lord to find themselves turned away from a church—a church that professed itself a fellowship of the Lord's people. Except for Gaius' timely intervention, they might have found themselves in a very distressed condition, since there was no-one else in this area to whom they could turn for assistance.

In verse 8, John declares the position that all local churches should adopt regarding bona fide travelling servants of God:

### 3 John 1:8

It is the duty of all local churches to show hospitality to travelling preachers, teachers and missionaries. These servants of God are dependent on the Lord for their daily provision, and the Lord expects his people to minister to their needs. In doing so, they are not giving them more than they are due—but only what is owed to them: For the worker deserves his wages.

Not only so, but those who willingly share in meeting the needs of God's servants, are sharing with them in the preaching of the Gospel or in ministering to the people of God. Therefore, we see that those also are missionaries who share in prayer, in giving, and in showing hospitality. Thus John writes—

*We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.*

Again, let us remember that some who have shown hospitality to strangers, have entertained angels unawares. (Heb. 13:2)

## Diotrephes' Intransigence

### 3 John 1:9-10

The apostle now mentions by name the person who has been causing so much trouble in the church, and to the missionary brothers.

John declares:

#### 3 John 1:9

John had already attempted to deal with this problem by writing directly to the church concerned. However, that local church was so much under the domineering will of Diotrephes, that they were unwilling—or afraid—to remedy the situation. They disregarded the apostle John's letter, and they rejected God's messengers. Diotrephes had fought his way to a position of authority and leadership—*self-assumed*, of course. He remained determined to hold on to this position, regardless of what anyone might say or do. Even John—an apostle of the Lord Jesus—could get nowhere with this stubborn and egotistical individual.

By his very attitude, Diotrephes was demonstrating his lack of love, kindness, understanding, patience, compassion and every other virtue. From what we can learn of him, it is doubtful if he exemplified any of the fruits of the Spirit. If this was so, then clearly Diotrephes knew nothing of the work of the Spirit in regeneration or sanctification. The very fact that he loved to be first—to occupy a pre-eminent position—instead of seeking the lowliest position, indicates how far removed he was from the Master's example and teaching.

Therefore, in verse 10, John writes:

#### 3 John 1:10

John promises that—if God makes it possible for him to visit the churches in this area—he will publicise to these churches what Diotrephes has been doing. He will make it plain to the Lord's people that the gossip being spread abroad by this evil individual is nothing more than scurrilous allegation, innuendo and slander. These are the very sins in which the devil himself indulges. Clearly, these pernicious remarks were aimed not only at the apostle John, but also at others who associated with him. Therefore, the apostle declares—

*So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, gossiping maliciously about us....*

Not content with maligning the character and reputation of the apostle and his fellow-workers, Diotrephes resolutely refused to admit these brothers into the local church—even although he knew that they were the Lord's servants. Indeed, not only did he himself refuse them entry, but also he forbade anyone else in the church from welcoming them.

So great was Diotrephes' hostility against the Lord's servants, that he expelled from the church any person who was willing to show kindness or hospitality toward them. He ejected from the fellowship those who were likely to welcome God's servants into their homes. Under such adverse circumstances, faithful Gaius must have met with great difficulty. If Diotrephes had not already expelled Gaius from the church, it seemed certain that he would expel him very soon.

## Imitate what is Good

### 3 John 1:11-12

In verse 11, the apostle writes:

#### 3 John 1:11

John appeals to his dear friend, Gaius, not to imitate the evil attitudes and practices of men like Diotrephes—not that Gaius was ever likely to do so! However, from this remark, it appears that the apostle considered Diotrephes to be a real worker of evil, and probably nothing less than a servant of the evil one himself. As a rule, those who practise evil are of the evil one, whereas those who practise good are of God. Thus John says—

*...do not imitate what is evil but what is good....*

This confirms what has been hinted at earlier. The person who habitually practises righteous living does so because he has been born again of God's Holy Spirit. The person who habitually practises evil does so because he has never experienced the regenerating, saving and sanctifying power of God's Holy Spirit. He is still in his sins. Like the rest of unregenerate humanity, that person lies under the control (or dominating influence) of the evil one.

In verse 12, John takes time to mention specifically another faithful servant of God:

#### 3 John 1:12

The name Demetrius means *'belonging to Ceres,'* but nothing is known about this servant of God apart from what John says here. However, from John's remarks—and from the testimony of other believers—it becomes evident that this man had remained faithful to the truth. This was much to Demetrius' credit—especially considering the prevailing circumstances. It is to such individuals that the Lord's people would turn for help and encouragement during the very distressing times to which the evil and domineering Diotrephes was subjecting them. Therefore, John writes on behalf of the Church generally, to commend Demetrius and to encourage both him and other faithful believers to remain faithful to God and to the Lord's teaching.

## Closing Remarks

### 3 John 1:13-14

In verses 13 and 14, the apostle closes this short personal letter to Gaius with these words:

#### 3 John 1:13

If God permitted, John intended to make a personal visit to these dear believers. Then, the apostle planned to encourage them face to face, and perhaps to try to resolve matters within their local fellowship. This could prove to be a difficult task. Diotrephes was not at all willing to submit to apostolic authority; and—we must remember—John was by now an old man. He would not find it easy to deal with Diotrephes. Nevertheless, John was the Lord's servant—as were others whom Diotrephes had refused to admit to this troubled local church. It is certain that—one way or another—God would bring about the removal of Diotrephes from the church. If he remained unrepentant and resolutely stubborn despite

all attempts by the Lord's people to show him lovingly the error of his ways, then, ultimately, the Lord would deal with him more directly.

Therefore, John writes—

*(13) I have much to write to you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink.*

In the past, those who *opposed* the Lord—or the true servants of the Lord—wilfully and persistently, found themselves *deposed* by the Lord. Sacred history does not tell us what happened to Diotrephes. The only thing for which he is remembered in God's Word is the evil that he caused to the church and the harm that he inflicted on the Lord's faithful people.

In the closing verse, John writes:

### **3 John 1:14**

In the midst of their sad and troubled situation, the apostle blesses these dear saints with the peace of God: that peace which the world cannot give—nor take away. This was the peace engendered in their hearts and lives by the Holy Spirit, and revived by the realisation of John's concern for them and of his intention to visit them.

These afflicted believers would become greatly encouraged, too, to realise that the Lord's people in John's home area were remembering them and praying for them—and that they had sent their love and greetings. In conclusion, John asks that all the faithful saints of God in this troubled church be greeted individually by name.

From this letter, we observe that where one member of Christ's body suffers—or one local church—the whole body (or Church) suffers with it. Considering the importance of love among God's people, this is only natural. We are all members of the one body (the Church)—of which Christ is the Head. We need each other for support and encouragement, whether from evils arising within the Church through individuals like Diotrephes, or from the ungodly world around us.

Let us remember therefore how much the Lord Jesus loved us when he died to reconcile us to God, and let us endeavour to walk in love—and in the truth of God's Holy Word. If we do these things, it is that much less likely that evil will be able to gain an entry into our local fellowships. When our lives exemplify the true love of Christ, and when we uphold God's truth faithfully and diligently, we can expect the church to flourish. This occurs under the preaching of the Word, and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus, we bring glory to God's holy name; and, by this means, the Holy Spirit draws seeking souls to Christ. In the same way, these souls are fed and nourished on the sacred and imperishable Word of the living Sovereign God. And to his name be all the glory in Christ Jesus, for ever and ever. Amen.