

Three Men in Third John

3 John 1-14

1 The elder unto the wellbeloved **Gaius**, whom I love in the truth. **2** Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. **3** For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. **4** I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

5 Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; **6** Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: **7** Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. **8** We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth.

9 I wrote unto the church: but **Diotrephes**, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. **10** 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.

11 Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God.

12 **Demetrius** hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. **13** I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: **14** 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.

role models

Third John is one of the shortest books in the Bible. Yet three men are named and described therein. The first and third of these are great role models. The second of the three represents that which should not be imitated.

Gaius, the original recipient of Third John, is commended for receiving and helping itinerant Christian workers (5-6). Since he gladly supported the Lord's work (8) and the truth (3), he is the main role model in the letter. More is written about him than about the other two.

Gaius cooperated with the Apostle, but **Diotrephes** is the ultimate bad guy who refused to host and help the traveling evangelists who were recommended by John. Because the letter is so short, we lack background information about Diotrephes, but it's clear that his core problem was his prideful love of being in charge (9).

Near the end (12), John commended **Demetrius** who may have been the one who delivered the letter. Like Gaius, he believed the truth and lived in light of it. Therefore he had a good testimony and may have been well known in his home area at the time. (Sadly, he is little known today.)

There is much to learn from these three little-known men and from the only direct command in Third John (11). We must imitate those who do good rather than those who do evil.

negatives

Diotrephes and his sinful actions are the biggest problems addressed in Third John. So it is tempting to focus on him alone, but there were other troubles as well. Several of these are focused of in the A section below.

One problem which is probably not stressed enough on the worksheet below is the health related dangers involved in travel in that age. A careful study on Epaphroditus who nearly died while assisting Paul in Rome (Phil. 2:23-30) would bring this out. Moreover, living conditions and health care at that time were not all that great for those like Gaius who stayed at home either (3).

What did Diotrephes actually do that was so bad? The first several B lines below deal with his sinful actions. There is quite a list. The root problem was in his heart, however, and the final B line (B-7) deals with this.

The root problem was that Diotrephes loved to have the preeminence within the church (9). Is a person who loves to have the preeminence really saved (B-7)? This question is more difficult than it may seem, since even the Lord's disciples debated about which of them would be the greatest (Lk. 9:46). Yet, we know that the eleven were true believers. What about Diotrephes?

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

A	() The situation was difficult in various ways.
A-1	() Verse one shows that John was very old (1, 14).
A-2	() Gaius may have been poor and in poor health (1-8).
A-3	() John was not present to deal with church problems (11, 13).
A-4	() There were many traveling teachers who needed help (5-7).
A-5	() Some of the traveling speakers were unknown people (5).
A-6	() Some traveling speakers were false teachers (2 Jn. 7-10).
B	() Diotrephes was very bad (9-11).
B-1	() He spoke against John falsely (10).
B-2	() He did not welcome traveling workers (9-10).
B-3	() He did not acknowledge John's authority (9-10).
B-4	() He wrongly expelled some church members (10).
B-5	() He had too much authority within the church (9-10).
B-6	() He probably had more authority than Gaius (11).
B-7	() He probably was not a genuine believer (9-11).

positives

Praise the Lord that Third John does not begin nor end with Diotrephes! Instead, faithful Gaius is addressed in the opening verses (1-4) and godly Demetrius appears near the end (12). In addition, there are beloved friends in the final verse (14).

John was, of course, absent when he wrote his letter, but he was **not** alone. There were friends with him and he had other friends with Gaius. These friends (14) were probably his beloved and faithful coworkers who contrast with those who had joined Diotrephes in opposing the Apostle (9). John's coworkers were of God; those who sided with Diotrephes were not (11).

Before writing to Gaius, John wrote to the church (9), a specific church. Obviously there were serious problems because of Diotrephes, but the church still existed or at least the faithful ones who were expelled by Diotrephes (10) still existed and were known to John.

Perhaps Gaius was one of those who were thrown out by Diotrephes, but it is more likely that he was a leader in a different, but nearby church. John may have written to him so that those in his fellowship would make extra efforts to help itinerant workers who were passing through the area because Diotrephes had refused to do so. The work of God had not stopped.

Mark the points below as correct (C), incorrect (X), or partly correct (▲).

C	() Third John is very personal and practical.
C-1	() Many personal names are included (1, 9, 12).
C-2	() It was written to beloved Gaius instead of Diotrophes.
C-3	() John's spiritual children are mentioned with joy in verse four.
C-4	() Love is mentioned many times in Third John (1, 2, 5, 11, 14).
C-5	() It is much like Second John and Paul's letter to Philemon.
C-6	() Third John is too short to be very theological (11-12).
D	() God's work was going forward.
D-1	() Gaius walked in truth (1-4).
D-2	() Gaius supported God's work (1, 5-8).
D-3	() Demetrius was a good worker (11-12).
D-4	() There were multiple local churches (6, 9, 10).
D-5	() Most of the churches supported God's work (5-10).
D-6	() John ruled over the various local churches (1, 9-10).
D-7	() Third John solved the Diotrophes problem (10).

worksheet answers

John separated people into two distinct groups with the phrases ‘of God’ and ‘not of God’ (1 John 3:10, 4:2-3, 4:6, and 3 John 11). Thus verse eleven clearly shows that Diotrephes was probably not on God’s side (B-7).

Verse one alone, however, does not prove that John was an old man. Of course, he was old (A-1), but he was still able to travel (14), and the term ‘elder’ refers to his authority as well as to his age. He was over the churches (10), but ‘rule’ may be too cold a term to use in describing his relationship with them. (Line D-6 is partly correct.) Third John is very personal and practical (C).

Obviously, John wrote his third letter to deal with the practical problems caused by Diotrephes and those that sided with him. Yet, John was not counting on the letter alone to solve the problem (D-7). There were authority and leadership issues that would require John’s presence (10, 14).

It is significant that John wrote to the church rather than to Diotrephes. The church as a whole was to receive traveling workers, but somehow Diotrephes was able to overrule other church members (B-6). He exercised too much authority, but that does not mean that he legitimately had such authority in God’s eyes. (B-5 is only partly correct.)

So what?

Third John and Second John must be applied together, since they are like the two sides of the same coin. Rejecting heretics is good (*Second John*), but rejecting those who stand for the truth is bad (*Third John*).

Thus, these two letters deal with one of the most basic but thorny issues that exist. Who should believers work with and who should be rejected? Since truth is stressed in both letters, the answer involves biblical doctrine. (*Third John is far more theological than many realize, C-6.*) Like church leaders in John’s day, leaders today can not avoid taking positions regarding cooperation.

Some try to avoid difficulty and strife by insisting that Second John is only about rejecting well-known cults, such as the J.W.’s. A big problem with this minimalist approach is that the most dangerous doctrinal errors have always been subtle and difficult to detect. Second John is not just about rejecting cultists.

In Third John, Demetrius shows that those who stand for biblical truth have a good testimony because they live out what they believe (12). Believing rightly and living rightly go together and brings joy to our hearts (4). False teachers may sound good, but their lives are evil (11). Gaius and Demetrius were good; Diotrephes was not.

applications

Apply the points which you believe are most important or seem most needful.
