

3 JOHN

WRITER

This is one of five letters by John the apostle who was the son of Zebedee and Salome (See “Writer” in intro. to Jn). It is a personal letter written by John to one whom he knew well in the work of world evangelism.

DATE

There are some Bible students who affirm that this letter was written between A.D. 80 and 90. However, it is probable that the letter was written sometime before A.D. 70, though this cannot be established with certainty.

THEME

The theme of John’s message to Gaius is that Gaius continue in his faithful work of financial fellowship with disciples who had gone forth for the sake of the name of Jesus (vs 8). Because Gaius had been discouraged in doing this work, John wrote this personal letter in order that Gaius continue his efforts to reach beyond his presence with the gospel in order that evangelists continue to be sent forth. Gaius must not be hindered in assuming this responsibility.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

In the 1st century the evangelists went forth to preach the gospel throughout the world (Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15,20). They were sent forth by those who remained at home (At 13:1-3; Rm 10:14,15). In their travels, they stayed with Christians as Gaius, who, as local residents, sent them forth to preach the gospel to the lost. Among the disciples with

whom Gaius fellowshiped, a brother by the name of Diotrephes was hindering the worldwide organic function of the body. Because Diotrephes had assumed dictatorial authority over some local disciples, these disciples were hindered from carrying out their responsibility to send forth the gospel by supporting evangelists. Because of his domination of the disciples in his area, Diotrephes would not receive evangelists. He would not allow others over whom he had control to receive the evangelists. Out of desperation, Gaius possibly wrote to John in order to explain the situation and ask for advice. John wrote this brief letter in return because he planned to come and deal directly with the problem. John wrote to reassure Gaius for his faithful work of supporting evangelists (vss 1-8). In this letter, John identified the arrogant nature and practice of dictatorial leaders as Diotrephes who seek to exercise authority among the disciples (vss 9,10). He encouraged Gaius to maintain fellowship with brothers as Demetrius until he came to deal directly with the problem (vss 11,12).

In dealing with the problem that had arisen among the disciples where Gaius lived, John makes a contrast between two styles of leadership. Gaius represents a leadership style that is patterned after the nature of loving the truth and understanding the organic function of the body of Christ. However, Diotrephes represents an autocratic, or even dictatorial leadership style, that is the result of a desire for authority and control over one's fellow man (Compare comments Mk 10:35-45). It may have been that Diotrephes was sincere in his behavior, however, he was seriously wrong in how he dealt with fellow disciples. He was working against God because he was hindering Christians from carrying out their responsibility to take the gospel to all the world.

Outline: (1) Introduction (1), (2) Reassurance of Gaius (2-4), (3) Supporting evangelists (5-8), (4) The sins of Diotrephes (9,10), (5) Imitate good (11,12), (5) Plans to come (13,14)

INTRODUCTION

1 *The elder:* John identifies himself as the older brother, or possibly one who had been designated an elder among the disciples with whom he labored (See 1 Pt 5:1). He identifies himself with this brief letter as he did with 2 John in order that his readers associate him as the inspired writer of both epistles (See comments 2 Jn 1). ***Gaius:*** This was a common name of the 1st century. It is used several times in the New Testament where reference is not necessarily to the same person (See At 19:29; 20:4; Rm 16:23; 1 Co 1:14). It could be that this Gaius is one of the disciples who is mentioned in other New Testament books. There is no way of knowing for sure if this is the case. In this letter, Gaius is identified as a close friend of God, for he had given himself to serve God. ***Whom I love in truth:*** The Greek article is not present before “truth,” and thus, reference is to truth in general. John’s relationship with Gaius was based on what both had obeyed (See comments 1 Jn 1:3; 3:18; 2 Jn 1). It is the truth, therefore, that establishes our relationships with one another. These relationships are stronger than physical family relationships. The word “truth” here is probably used to refer to the truth of the gospel about which Paul wrote and defended in the Galatian letter (Gl 2:5,14; see Cl 1:5). This was the truth that Jesus as the Christ, died for our sins and was resurrected for our hope (1 Co 15:1-4). Our obedience to the gospel (Rm 6:3-6), brings Christians into fellowship with God and one another.

REASSURANCE OF GAIUS

2 *I pray that in all things you may prosper:* The statements John makes here concerning his prayer for Gaius identify the apostle’s relationship with this great spiritual

man. John prayed that Gaius materially prosper and be in good health “just as” he was spiritually prospering. Herein is a Christ-sent apostle praying for the financial prosperity of a brother whose spiritual prosperity—if it could be measured—excelled beyond both material prosperity and bodily health. Such is the nature of spiritually minded leaders. Good leaders are careful to maintain their spiritual prosperity in order that their material prosperity not take control of their lives. They always seek kingdom business first (Mt 6:33; see comments Mt 6:19-34; Rm 12:1,2; Cl 3:1-3). This is the nature of good leadership among the disciples in reference to material things. The spiritual greatness of Gaius encouraged the apostle to offer prayers for him. We would thus assume that Gaius would characterize the type of leader we should be.

3 Brethren ... testified of the truth that is in you: Great leaders have a good reputation concerning the truth that is in them. The traveling evangelists who were going about from house to house were giving testimony to the fellowship that Gaius extended to them. **You walk in truth:** John’s reference here to “truth” is not that Gaius believed a set of rules that conformed to correct doctrine. The context identifies that about which he speaks. Gaius was behaving after the nature of the truth that Jesus revealed to us (See comments 1 Jn 3:17-19; see comments Jn 4:24; 13:34,35). To walk in truth is to walk in the love that was manifested on the cross. Walking in love means to care for our brother as Jesus cared for our sins on the cross. This would especially be true in reference to those who are going forth to preach the gospel to the lost. This was the truth in which Gaius was walking. This was the truth that Diotrefes was denying by his refusal to receive the evangelists.

4 No greater joy: The Greek phrase here is emphatic, and thus, 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 traveling evangelists, he expressed his overwhelming joy of hearing that one of his converts was maintaining behavior that was worthy of the gospel (See comments Ph 1:27). That which brings joy to the hearts of evangelists is to hear that those they have converted are functioning according to the nature of the gospel of love they obeyed (See 1 Co 4:15; Ph 1:10). Evangelists that sow seeds of legalistic thinking will not be encouraged when they hear that their converts are biting and devouring one another over senseless issues (See comments Gl 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 (Compare 1 Pt 5:1-4).

SUPPORTING EVANGELISTS

5 *You do faithfully:* The faithful work Gaius was laboring to do was to be supportive of those traveling evangelists who were going forth to preach the gospel (Compare Rm 12:13; Hb 13:2; 1 Pt 4:9). 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, reference could be to being hospitable to anyone who might need to be received (See Gl 6:10; Hb 13:2). Whatever the case in this verse, Gaius was a very supportive person who opened the doors of his home and his pocket in order to help fellow disciples who were in transit for the purpose of preaching the gospel. Such is characteristic of those who would be functioning members of the body (See 1 Tm 3:2). They will especially help traveling evangelists on their mission to preach the gospel to the world.

6 *Who have borne witness of your love:* Those traveling brethren who were taken in by Gaius went forth telling others of the hospitable love by which Gaius had received

them. ***You will do well:*** Diotrephes had discouraged Gaius and other disciples concerning their responsibility to support evangelists who were going about preaching the gospel (vs 10). John thus writes to encourage Gaius that what he was doing was a job well done. Those who would do well in fulfilling their responsibilities as functioning members of the body for world evangelism, must do as Gaius (Rm 10:14,15). They must receive and send forth those who have committed themselves to preach the gospel to the world. Good leaders lead by carrying out this work that God has given to every Christian. ***Support them on their journey:*** The Greek verb here is from *propempe* which refers to financially sending one forth on his journey. In the 1st century, this word referred to accompanying one part way on his journey, and then, financially making it possible for the evangelist to continue to his next destination (See At 15:3; 21:5; Rm 15:24; 1 Co 16:6,11; 2 Co 1:16; Ti 3:13).

7,8 In these two verses, John reassures and encourages Gaius by giving three reasons why individual Christians should support evangelists who are going about preaching the gospel: (1) The evangelists have gone forth in order to proclaim the name of Jesus among the nations. John deduces that since they have gone forth, then it is the responsibility of every Christian who understands that this is also his mission, to support evangelists in their work (See comment Ph 4:10-19). (2) Since the evangelists took no contributions from the unbelievers to whom they went, then John deduces that those who believe must support them (See comments At 18:3; 20:33-35; 1 Co 9:6-18; 2 Co 11:7-11). (3) Since the evangelists have gone forth for the sake of the gospel, John again assumes that we can deduce that we should support them in order to be fellow workers for the truth of the gospel they preach (Rm 13:8,9; Ph 2:25; 4:3; Pl 24). The partnership between those who go forth and those

who send forth is effective in world evangelism as long as everyone plays their part in the organic function of the body. When either those who are sent, or those who send, do not carry out their God-ordained responsibilities to preach the gospel to the world, then men lose their souls because the body has become dysfunctional. In order to emphasize the responsibility of the senders, John states that “we ought” to carry out our responsibility in this area of world evangelism since this is the reasonable thing to do as members of the body (See At 13:1-3; see comments Ph 4:10-18). Those who do not fulfill this responsibility have not understood the mission of the One after whom they call themselves (See Mt 28:19,20; Mk 16:15; Lk 19:10).

THE SINS OF DIOTREPES

9,10 John here explains the problem that was not only facing Gaius, but also all the disciples in their evangelistic function as the body of Christ. The problem was a dictatorial leader who had assumed control, and thus, was intimidating the disciples to conform to his wishes. ***I wrote:*** John’s reference here could be to the letter of 2 John. However, it could also be to a personal letter that John had previously written, but was destroyed by Diotrephes. John wrote the letter, but such a letter need not to have been an inspired letter that the Holy Spirit intended for the disciples to have as a part of the New Testament canon. Every letter the apostles wrote did not have to be an inspired document. Whatever the case here, Diotrephes possibly destroyed the letter in order to restrict contact of those over whom he had control, from any influence other than himself. ***Diotrephes:*** In some way Diotrephes gained great control over some disciples in his region. It is difficult to determine how he gained such control. One answer may be found in the name “Diotrephes.” This name means “Zeus reared offspring of Zeus.” This 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 enjoyed before becoming a Christian. The brethren simply maintained their respect for him that he had from them when he was outside the fellowship of the disciples in the community. John indicates from the use of the phrase “who loves to be first,” that Diotrephes took advantage of the humble hearts of the disciples. Over a period of time he gained a controlling hand among certain house fellowships in order to command the affairs of the disciples. In this letter, John does not condemn the disciples for allowing Diotrephes to gain such control. He directs his judgments about Diotrephes who took advantage of those whose nature had been formed after the servanthood of Jesus (See comments Mk 10:35-45). Therefore, John lists six sins of Diotrephes that are typical of the behavior of autocratic 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 first:** Preeminence refers to one who loves to be first. This desire is completely contrary to the servanthood spirit that Jesus taught (See comments Mt 22:20-28; Mk 10:35-45). Those men who thirst for an occasion to have authority over their fellow man will seek an opportunity to take advantage of the servanthood attitude of the disciples (See comments At 8:18-23). Their sin is in stealing away the lordship of Jesus by intimidating disciples to submit to their rules and regulations. (2) **Does not receive us:** The pronoun “us” possibly refers to John and the other apostles. John may have included the traveling evangelists in this pronoun, though he follows later with a statement concerning Diotrephes not receiving the “brethren.” Whatever the case here, at least one thing is identified. It is

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 did not want anyone else coming in who might rebuke him for his authoritarian control of the disciples. Therefore, John and any other evangelist or apostle, was not received by Diotrephes. (3) ***Accusing us with malicious words:*** This third sin of Diotrephes is the natural behavior of those who would seek to maintain authority. In order to keep outside influence away from the disciples, the dictatorial ruler must recruit the local disciples to help him keep others out. Therefore, he resorts to slander of his opposition in order to defame those he considers to be a threat to his authority. Through slander he convinces the members that others are “false teachers” who must be shunned, and thus, kept from influencing those over whom he seeks to dominate. Therefore, Diotrephes sought to defame John and others in order to convince the local disciples that they must not receive them into their fellowship where he reigned with dictatorial control. One should be cautious, therefore, when hearing others slander the good name of brethren with whom they disagree. Slander is an abominable sin that will end many in judgment where they will receive their just reward for defaming the character of others (Pv 10:8,10,18; 1 Tm 3:11; see Rm 3:8). One should be warned about intentionally and verbally inflicting injury on others with malicious words. Slander reveals an unholy heart. (4) ***Does not receive the brethren:*** The word “brethren” here may have specific reference to the traveling evangelists, or it may be generic in the sense that Diotrephes did not receive any brother. The dictatorial paranoia of Diotrephes was manifested in the fact that he did not want any brother in his sectarian party who might endanger the psychological hold he had over his group of dis-

ciples. 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 behavior or encourage the brethren to reject him from his position. (5) ***Forbids those who would:*** The extent to which Diotrephes controlled the disciples is manifested here. 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 (See comments 1 Pt 5:1-4). They have forgotten that they will have to stand before the Chief Shepherd whose sheep they have stolen through their autocratic behavior (See Rm 2:16; 14:10,12; 2 Co 5:10). (6) ***Casts them out of the church:*** Diotrephes ruled by intimidation. He ruled by threat of excommunication from the fellowship of the disciples. Any who would not conform to his wishes were threatened to be disfellowshipped. Gaius may have been one of these members who was threatened by Diotrephes. The preceding practices of Diotrephes left these disciples in a very tense situation. It was such a tense situation that a letter was directed from the inspired hand of an apostle to correct it. We wish that John had written more. However, enough was written here to identify the nature of those leaders who seek to be lords over the flock of God. We understand from John's character profile of Diotrephes that he loved to be first. Such a desire will progressively lead to severing fellowship with one's brethren with whom he may disagree. Loving to be first, therefore, is the ruin of those who would carry out such selfish ambition among the disciples.

IMITATE GOOD

11 *Do not follow what is evil:* The English word "mimic" is from the Greek word *mimou* that is used here. Christians must not mimic that which is evil, but that which is good

(See Ps 37:27; Is 1:16; Ph 3:17; 4:9; 1 Th 1:6; 1 Pt 3:11; 1 Jn 3:10). John explains that what Diotrephes was doing is evil. Every leader, therefore, should caution himself about following the means by which Diotrephes maintained control over some of the disciples. **From God:** Those who follow after examples of good are of the nature of God who is love (1 Jn 2:29; 3:6-10; 4:7-16). **Not seen God:** Those who carry out their ungodly attitudes to do evil have not seen the nature of God. They do not understand the character of the God of love and compassion (1 Jn 3:6; see Mk 10:45). One who has never seen God by seeking to behave in a godly manner on earth will certainly never be in the presence of God in heaven.

12 Diotrephes manifested in his life that which was evil. His behavior was in contrast to that of Demetrius whom John here sets forth as an example of good for Gaius to fellowship (See 1 Tm 3:7). Others were giving witness to the goodness of Demetrius and his life that conformed to the nature of the truth of the gospel. John states that he and the other apostles also give their testimony to the character of Demetrius. Though John does not give us more information concerning Demetrius, at least for the reassurance of Gaius, he is set forth as the one with whom Gaius must fellowship in these trying times. In such times of controversy, those who are of the nature of the truth of the gospel, and thus, have seen God through their godly behavior, must seek out those who manifest goodness as Demetrius. It is often during times of such tension as described in this letter that the goodness of pure hearts is manifested. At the same time, the evil of those who have wrong motives is also manifested (See comments 1 Co 11:19). When one is under great pressure, his true character is often manifested.

PLANS TO COME

13,14 *Many things to write:* It is evident that the situa-

tion among the disciples wherein Diotrephes had assumed dictatorial control was so grave that the apostle intended to write many things to correct the problem (See 2 Jn 12). 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 were the case, then certainly Diotrephes would have been in a very uncomfortable situation in the presence of one who had the power of a Christ-sent apostle (See comments At 5:1-11; 13:6-11; 1 Co 5:5; 2 Co 12:14 – 13:6; 1 Tm 1:20). Christ-sent apostles had the power to unleash physical punishment from God on those who harmed the sheep of God. In this situation, it could be assumed that John had such in mind as he planned to visit Gaius. ***Peace be to you:*** Peace should come to the heart of Gaius in view of the fact that the apostle was coming (Compare Ep 6:23; 1 Pt 5:14). 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. ***Our friends:*** There were those in the company of John who were also known by Gaius. Their friendship was more than 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 body of Christ. John also knew brethren who were disciples in the area where Gaius was living. Gaius must seek fellowship with those who are faithful. He closes by asking Gaius to greet them on his behalf.

ABBREVIATIONS**OLD TESTAMENT**

Genesis - **Gn**, Exodus - **Ex**, Leviticus - **Lv**, Numbers - **Nm**, Deuteronomy - **Dt**, Joshua - **Ja**, Judges - **Jg**, Ruth - **Rt**, 1 Samuel - **1 Sm**, 2 Samuel - **2 Sm**, 1 Kings - **1 Kg**, 2 Kings - **2 Kg**, 1 Chronicles - **1 Ch**, 2 Chronicles - **2 Ch**, Ezra - **Er**, Nehemiah - **Ne**, Esther - **Et**, Job - **Jb**, Psalms - **Ps**, Proverbs - **Pv**, Ecclesiastes - **Ec**, Song of Solomon - **Ss**, Isaiah - **Is**, Jeremiah - **Jr**, Lamentations - **Lm**, Ezekiel - **Ez**, Daniel - **Dn**, Hosea - **Hs**, Joel - **Jl**, Amos - **Am**, Obadiah - **Ob**, Jonah - **Jh**, Micah - **Mc**, Nahum - **Nh**, Habakkuk - **Hk**, Zephaniah - **Zp**, Haggai - **Hg**, Zechariah - **Zc**, Malachi - **Ml**

NEW TESTAMENT

Matthew - **Mt**, Mark - **Mk**, Luke - **Lk**, John - **Jn**, Acts - **At**, Romans - **Rm**, 1 Corinthians - **1 Co**, 2 Corinthians - **2 Co**, Galatians - **Gl**, Ephesians - **Ep**, Philippians - **Ph**, Colossians - **Cl**, 1 Thessalonians - **1 Th**, 2 Thessalonians - **2 Th**, 1 Timothy - **1 Tm**, 2 Timothy - **2 Tm**, Titus - **Ti**, Philemon - **Pl**, Hebrews - **Hb**, James - **Js**, 1 Peter - **1 Pt**, 2 Peter - **2 Pt**, 1 John - **1 Jn**, 2 John - **2 Jn**, 3 John - **3 Jn**, Jude - **Jd**, Revelation - **Rv**