

Examining the text & our hearts:

1 The elder: To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth. 2 Dear friend, I pray that you are prospering in every way & are in good health, just as your whole life is going well. 3 For I was very glad when fellow believers came & testified to your fidelity to the truth—how you are walking in truth. 4 I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are walking in truth. 5 Dear friend, you are acting faithfully in whatever you do for the brothers & sisters, especially when they are strangers. 6 They have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God, 7 since they set out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from pagans. 8 Therefore, we ought to support such people so that we can be coworkers with the truth. 9 I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, does not receive us. 10 This is why, if I come, I will remind him of the works he is doing, slandering us with malicious words. And he is not satisfied with that! He not only refuses to welcome fellow believers, but he even stops those who want to do so & expels them from the church. 11 Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God. 12 Everyone speaks well of Demetrius – even the truth itself. And we also speak well of him, & you know that our testimony is true. 13 I have many things to write you, but I don't want to write to you with pen & ink. 14 I hope to see you soon, & we will talk face to face. 15 Peace to you. The friends send you greetings. Greet the friends by name. (3 John 1-15)

1. Background

a. 3 John's value to the Canon of Scripture

a. *"3 John couches its very practical concerns in the theologically rich vocabulary of the Fourth Gospel & of 1–2 John, using & reusing words like 'truth' & 'testify/testimony.' This not only secures the Johannine quality of the letter & shows its natural fit within the Johannine corpus but also **shows how this letter articulates one of the more surprising, yet characteristic, expressions of Johannine theology**. One cannot only know the truth but must also 'do the truth' (1 John 1:6; John 3:21). If 2 John urges its readers not to invite the secessionists into their midst with hospitality in order to avoid sharing in their false teaching, 3 John urges Gaius to invite the true teachers into his church in order to share in the truth, & so be a 'coworker' in the truth, which echoes the sentiment of 1 John 3:18, which urges, 'Let us love, not in word or speech, but in action & in reality/truth.' ... **3 John represents the practical application of a profound theological vision**." (George L. Parsenios, *Paideia: Commentaries on the New Testament, First, Second, & Third John*, pp. 164-5)*

b. 3 John is a letter of introduction

a. *"[T]he letter of introduction is ... a passport of sorts, identifying that the person should be treated in a particular way & given a certain kind of privilege... [W]e should assume that 3 John is being carried by Demetrius as he travels to Gaius."* (George L. Parsenios, *Op Cit*, p. 166)

c. The letters of John were written to a network of house churches

a. *"It...seems likely that Gaius & Diotrephes...belong to **two separate house churches in the same location**; since Diotrephes had refused to give hospitality to the traveling missionaries, the Elder is writing to request Gaius does so (3 Jn. 6)."* (Paul Treblico, *Early Christians in Ephesus* ..., p. 270)

b. *"This much we know: **the church of 3 John belonged to the wider Johannine community**, read the publicly-circulated 1 John, & lived some distance from John himself...Some have viewed [3 Jn.] as the most non-theological letter in the NT...It is the only NT book that does not mention 'Jesus' or 'Christ'."* (Gary M. Burge, *1-3 John*, p.)

2. Gaius Brings Great Joy (3 Jn. 1-4)

a. John's prayer for Gaius (vv. 1-2)

a. A dear friend, not a superior

a. *"The expanded & reconfigured [introductory health wish (v. 2)] used together with the formula of joy [vv. 3-4] in 3 John 2-4 shows that the Elder **does not intend to write his letter from the position of a higher authority**. Furthermore, in requesting hospitality, he uses [a]... formula, indicating his intention to persuade Gaius, whom he also includes in 'us' (3 Jn. 12). Thus, the epistolary rhetoric of **3 John fits better with a correspondence between partners rather than an***

exhortation in an institutionalized hierarchy, unlike the case of the Ignatian letters.” (Kyu Seop Kim, “Politeness & Authority in 3 John,” *Journal of Theological Studies* (Aug., 2024) p.)

- b. Loving in truth means demonstrating one’s love in concrete acts
 - a. “The opening clause of the letter ends by affirming that the Elder not only loves Gaius but that **he loves him ‘in truth.’** The phrase **should be understood here...[as] demonstrat[ing] one’s love in concrete acts** ... **The purpose of the letter**, consequently, is to **ensure that Gaius displays that love through the real-life course of action** that the Elder encourages him to follow.” (George L. Parsenios, *Op. Cit*, p. 150)
 - c. Not proof for the prosperity gospel
 - a. “One morning Oral Roberts opened the Bible for a word from God & read the first verse his eyes fell upon, which happened to be 3 John 2. He took this verse to be a prompting of the Spirit to begin a ministry of **‘whole-person prosperity.’** Over time this verse became what Roberts called the **‘master key’ of his ministry**, for he read it to say, despite the Greek, that **God desires above all things that Christians have the fullness of prosperity here & now**, an interpretation that corrected his previous view of the virtue of Christian poverty.” (Karen Jobes, *Op Cit*, p. 377)
 - b. “The chief...objection to the prosperity gospel is that it is not a faithful account of the Bible’s teaching. Those who teach that God wills all believers to prosper financially rely on a small number of proof texts. However, these are not representative of the Bible’s overall teaching on God’s will... **The Greek word translated ‘prosper’ here never refers to financial prosperity.** The ESV [says] ‘I pray that all may go well with you... [just] as it goes well with your soul.’ **The text is not telling us that God wants all Christians to prosper financially** ...This is simply the standard form of greeting in a personal letter in antiquity.” (Jonathan Black, *40 Questions About Pentecostalism*, pp. 30-31)
 - c. “Proponents of prosperity teaching frequently point to that verse (among others...) to prove their case. However, most theologians agree that John is doing nothing more than greeting a friend with well wishes. It is one thing to wish & want good things to happen to each other; it is a completely different thing to say that God wants the same things.” (David A Rich, *You Mean That Isn’t in the Bible?* p. 59)
 - d. “Just as”: *The wish is that Gaius’ outward prosperity may correspond to the condition of his soul.*” (Reinecker)
 - e. “**What if I were to pray for you & ask God to bless you physically to the same degree you are healthy spiritually, & what if He answered my prayer? What would happen?! Would you be fit, sick in bed, or nearly dead? Would we need to rush you to the emergency room & have you ushered into the ICU or CCU? Gaius was ‘soul healthy.’ The life of Christ was vibrant & alive in Him.** That same life is ours as we enjoy the blessings & benefits we have in Christ.” (Daniel Akin, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1, 2, 3 John*, p. 188)
- b. To John & the traveling Christian Workers (vv. 3, 6a)
 - a. “John could be ‘very glad’ (v. 3) & ‘have no greater joy’ (v. 4) because of what others were telling him about Gaius. **The truth was in him, & he lived what he believed.** In doctrine & deed, Gaius was commendable, praiseworthy, & a joy to his brothers & sisters in Christ. **There was no contradiction between his profession (talk) & practice (walk)...People cannot see your heart, but they can see your life.** Walk, live out, day by day, the gospel truth that is in you by virtue of your union with Christ.” (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit*, pp. 189-90)
 - b. “**Spiritual health does not necessarily imply well-being in every circumstance of life.** Especially in the first century, **fidelity to Christian faith could in fact result in various forms of suffering, persecution, & even execution** (1 Pet 2:21). The elder knows that Gaius is doing well spiritually because **those to whom he previously extended hospitality have returned & given a good report about him [v. 3].**” (Karen Jobes, *Op Cit*, p. 378)
 - c. “**Gaius’ behavior shows that he is faring well in his soul**, & the hope of the letter’s greeting is that he fares just as well in his physical health.” (George L. Parsenios, *Op Cit*, p. 151)
 - d. “**The Elder can speak of spiritual health in verse 2 because of what the brothers reported in verse 3.** Fellow believers have returned from Gaius to the Elder, & they testify that Gaius is “walking in the truth.” **His spiritual health is assured, but it is assured because of his physical actions.** He has provided material support for those who were sent to him (vv. 6 – 8).” (George L. Parsenios, *Op Cit*, pp. 151-2)
- c. Walking in the truth (vv. 3-4)
 - a. Living out the truth
 - a. “The verb **‘to walk’** is **used metaphorically to refer to how one lives one’s life** (1 Jn. 1:6, 7; 2:6 [2x], 11; 2 Jn. 4, 6 [2x]; 3 Jn. 3, 4)...There is no greater joy than to know that those who have heard the gospel are now putting it into practice by the way in which they live.” (Karen Jobes, *Op Cit*, pp. 379-81)
 - b. [In 2 Jn. 4] ‘To walk in truth’ means to love one another. Here in 3 John, ‘**to walk in truth’ means to show hospitality to the brothers.** The connection between 2 John & 3 John on this point makes it plain that **the command to love one another in 2 John finds its expression in the support given to traveling missionaries in 3 John.**” (George L. Parsenios, *Op Cit*, p. 152)
 - c. “**It is good to have the truth in us but it is better to manifest the truth in our lives.** We should not only hold the truth, but allow the truth to hold us.” (William MacDonald, *Believer’s Bible Commentary*, p. 2334)
 - d. “**The early church lived in a world that was possibly even more pluralistic than ours, with a plethora of religions and philosophies vying for the hearts & minds of people.** The Elder identifies **the gospel of Jesus Christ** as truth, not simply in the cognitive sense, but **as the existential reality that demands to be lived out** by those who call themselves followers of Christ.” (Karen Jobes, *Op Cit*, p. 382)
 - b. Gaius’ generosity & hospitality
 - a. “John wrote this letter to Gaius...whom he knew to be **generous & hospitable to strangers** ...John **commended Gaius for his generosity & hospitality** toward the traveling teachers & confronted Diotrephes, who refused [them]...The letter [3rd

*John] is very personal, yet from it we can see **the importance of being generous & hospitable to others** as a way of showing that we are following the truth.” (NLT Courage For Life Study Bible, p. 1474)*

- b. *“John’s 3rd letter encourages his friend Gaius...John delights in **Gaius’ generous provision** for fellow workers he didn’t even know, but he condemns Diotrephes’ refusal to welcome & provide for believers who are doing the Lord’s work.” (NIV Stewardship Study Bible , p.)*
- c. *“Third John was written to a **generous friend named Gaius** . He is noted for his hospitality, especially hosting traveling preachers...The theme of 3 John is that a culture of hospitality is critical to the spread of the gospel. It was the case then, & it remains true today.” (Sam Rainer, *Understanding the Bible as a Whole*, p. 159)*
- d. *“ **Gaius...had gone out of his way to be generous** . Those from John’s church who had visited Gaius had come back with a glowing report, & part of the reason for this letter [was] to thank him.” (N. T. Wright, *Early Christian Letters for Everyone* , p. 185)*
- e. *“Although this is a personal letter, we can look over the shoulder of Gaius & apply its lessons to our lives...Ask yourself which man you identify with. **Are you a Gaius, generously giving to others?** A Dementrius, loving the truth? Or a Diotrephes, looking out for yourself & your things?” (NLT Life Application Study Bible , p. 2210)*

3. Gaius Becoming a Co-Worker with the Truth Through His Generosity (3 Jn. 5-8)

- a. *“In 3 Jn. 5-7 we see **the vital role of hospitality** ...Here the addressees are commended for their love for the brothers & sisters, even though they are strangers. **This involves more than hospitality but certainly not less** . Food is right through these verses!” (Paul Treblico, “Early Christian Communities....”, *Ex Auditu*, Vol. 29 , p. 36)*
- b. *“The claim that Gaius is a wealthy householder is bolstered...[by recognizing] the financial costs associated with hospitality.” (JM Carman, “Scaling Gaius & Diotrephes,” *JSNT* (2020) p.)*
 - a. Being generous is an act of faithfulness (v. 5)
 - a. *“ **[John] rejoices that Gaius is no closet Christian** , whose religion is so private that it finds no public expression, but is **known by others for his faithfulness to the truth because of his way of life** .” (Karen Jobes, *Op Cit* , p. 382)*
- b. Encouragement to continue serving the traveling Christian workers (v. 6b-7)
 - a. *“ **John knew of Gaius’ service because on their return to John ‘they testified’ of his love** ‘in front of the church.’ **John responds by encouraging him to ‘just keep on doing what you are doing,’ ‘Please keep up the good work’** ...In providing lodging, food, money, encouragement, & prayer, & in standing with them even though they were ‘strangers,’ Gaius had honored God, the gospel, & John.” (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit* , p. 190)*
- c. Supporting Christian workers means we’re coworkers with the truth (v. 8)
 - a. *“There is no immediate doctrinal concern in the letter, or in the activity of Gaius, but **his support** for those who do have missionary & theological concerns (the traveling missionaries) **means that he is a coworker in their effort to spread the truth of the gospel** . The support for traveling missionaries is inherently connected to the theological work of the missionaries. **To support missionary work is to be a coworker in it** . But not everyone was a coworker of the missionaries. Diotrephes did not receive them.” (George L. Parsenius, *Op Cit* , p. 156)*
 - b. *“They did not attempt to finance God’s work with the world’s money. **They depended, & rightly so, on the generosity & gifts of the church** ...John wrote that ‘we ought to support such men so that we can be coworkers with the truth.’ **We may not physically go where they go, but we can go with them anyway by our support**. All pray. All give support. Some are sent. **All are essential as we cooperate together in the work of God** .” (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit* , p. 191)*

4. Diotrephes Brings Drama into the Church (3 Jn. 9-11)

- a. *“A man like Diotrephes can be impressive, build a following, & gather supporters who admire or even idolize him.” (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit* , p. 193)*
 - a. What’s behind the dispute? – a failure in action, not faith – refusing hospitality/generosity
 - a. The main possibilities: theological, personal & church authority
 - a. *“The Elder & Diotrephes are locked in combat...The cause of their conflict is less clear. The history of scholarship has seen **a variety of ways to explain the circumstances** that lie behind the tense tone of these verses, & the variety of explanations can be summarized in three overarching categories. They...could have battled over (**1**) **a theological dispute**, (**2**) **some personal matter**, or (**3**) **ecclesiastical authority** .” (George L. Parsenius, *Op Cit* , p. 157)*
 - b. *“ **What’s the precise nature of the dispute between Diotrephes & the [Elder]** . Smalley sums up the possible causes of the dispute as (**1**) **polity** [church governance], according to which Diotrephes is seen...as (a.) a monarchical [reigning] bishop, aggregating authority to himself or (b.) as a representative of charismatic leadership that’s being threatened by the [Elder]. Alternatively (**2**) ...the dispute is **doctrinal** , either (a.) Diotrephes or (b.) the [Elder??] being perceived as proto-Gnostic.” (Alistair C. Stewart, *Original Bishops* , p.)*
 - c. *“To take the second group of arguments (2) first, **there’s nothing said in the letter [3 Jn.] that pertains to doctrine** ... If doctrine were an issue John would say so... **It is therefore more probable that the argument is about church organization** [structure]... since a coherent situation can be outlined on the basis of the evidence that takes into account all the phenomena in the letter...” (Alistair C. Stewart, *Op Cit* p.)*
 - d. *“Were there the sharp theological differences made explicit in 2 Jn. [also here in] 3 Jn...the Elder would not have missed the opportunity to polemicize against Diotrephes. Yet he does neither. What is...obvious is the sharp dispute over jurisdiction & authority.” (D. Moody Smith, *1st, 2nd, & 3rd John* , p. 154)*
 - e. *John does “not...say...that the teaching of Diotrephes is heretical or agrees with that of the secessionists ...[He] never criticizes Diotrephes as a defector from ‘the truth,’ nor does he say that Diotrephes is a ‘deceiver’ or an ‘antichrist.’ Apparently,*

Diotrephes does 'acknowledge Jesus as coming in the flesh'...Diotrephes...represents a third alternative in the disintegrating Johannine fellowship : (1) the Elder's company, (2) the 'new wave' of the secessionists, & (3) Diotrephes' independence movement...[John] believers it's imperative to [end] the continuing divisions in his community." (Thomas F. Johnson, 1, 2 & 3 John , p. 61)

b. A powerful man with a character flaw

a. "...of everything the elder says about Diotrephes, **he does not call him an 'antichrist' or a false teacher or suggest that his doctrine is wrong** . The elder represents him as **a powerful man with a character flaw** , not with a heretical view of Christ." (Karen Jobes, *Op Cit* , p. 397)

c. Diotrephes using power to control

a. "**Diotrephes had at least 3 power bases : First, he had power to punish ; i.e., he could expel people from church. Second, he had power by information control** , because he did not welcome the [visiting] teaching brothers & thus prevented them from preaching in the church. **Third, Diotrephes, exploited his relational power base by spreading malicious stories** about the elder, with the purpose of weakening the church's trust in the elder." [Martina Kessler, Volker Kessler, "How the EA in Germany is addressing Abuse of Religious Power," *Evangelical Review of Theology*, Vol. 45, #3, (Aug., 2021), pp. 259-60]

b. The details of Diotrephes' poor behavior

a. "**Diotrephes...was basically Gaius' alter-ego at every turn, a man with a harmful & destructive agenda** . The bottom line for Diotrephes was that **he wanted to be the 'boss'** in the church. He **loved himself** & not others. **With perverted ambition & a dominating spirit** , he...**set himself up as lord in the church** . If anyone took exception to his actions, that person was **censured & dismissed from the congregation** . Carnality personified, Diotrephes is mirrored today by many in the church who exhibit a similar lust for power. They are leaders who have a messiah complex. They have taken their eyes off of Jesus & forgotten that He, & He alone, is Lord & Savior." (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit* , p. 191)

a. He loves to be first (v. 9a)

- a. The issue here was **not a doctrinal problem but personal pride** . He loved being first, number one, the captain of the ship, the CEO, the center of attention, & the main attraction...Diotrephes took for himself the position only Jesus should hold. **Tragically, many today take for themselves the position only Jesus should hold** . It may be a pastor, minister of worship or students, a deacon, a prominent layman, or a powerful & influential family." (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit* , p. 192)
- b. "The Elder depicts Diotrephes' characteristic leadership style with **a fascinating word not used elsewhere in the New Testament** ,...which he may have minted for the occasion. Utilizing a present participle, suggesting a typical & continuous attitude, **he dubs him 'the liking-to-be-first Diotrephes'** ." (Peter Rhea Jones, Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1, 2, & 3 John , p. 272)
- c. "It is clear from this verse that **there did exist some animosity between the Elder & Diotrephes** . The elder describes Diotrephes as one 'who loves to be first'... **When the Elder says that Diotrephes 'loves to be first', he is probably implying that he loves to be the leader & to exercise authority** . It is clear from later statements that Diotrephes not only loved to be first, but had actually succeeded in being recognised as such (v. 10b). It is best to see the Elder's reference to **Diotrephes' desire to be first in terms of his refusal to accede to the Elder's written request that he provide hospitality** to those whom the elder recommended." (Colin Kruse, *The Pillar NT Commentary: The Letters of John* , pp. 183-4)
- d. "Diotrephes...had **an exaggerated view of his own importance** . He was **a virtual dictator** in the assembly. His sin was pride of place, an inflated ego, & a violent jealousy for what he regarded as his own rights...Diotrephes had forgotten that Christ is the Head of the church...No mere man has the right to take charge, to make decisions, to receive [people], or to refuse [people]. **Such conduct is popery, & God hates it** ." (W. MacDonald, *Op Cit* , p. 2335)

b. He does not receive John & the traveling Christian workers (v. 9b, 10b)

- a. "**Diotrephes is doing what the Elder in 2 John recommended, denying hospitality to those with whom he, Diotrephes, disagrees** . This upsets the Elder in 3 Jn. because Diotrephes & the Elder are on different sides of this dispute." (Paul Treblico, *Op Cit* , p. 37)
- b. "In his second epistle [2 Jn.] John dealt with the **problem of welcoming deceivers** (which should **not** have been done); in this epistle [3 Jn.] he discusses the **error of not receiving believers** (which should have been done)." (Harold, Willmington, "3rd John at a Glance," (2017) *Owner's Manual File*. 48)

c. He slanders John & the traveling Christian workers with malicious words (v. 10a)

a. "Diotrephes was **slandering** . . .with **malicious words**. He was...**'gossiping maliciously'** (NIV). With vicious & wicked intent, Diotrephes had lied about John & slandered him. Trying to stack the deck & win the day, **he would stop at nothing to get his way** , even if it meant lying & acting with a heavy hand." (Daniel Akin, *Op Cit* , p. 192)

d. He stops believers from being generous & expels them from the church if they do so (v. 10c)

a. "[Diotrephes] loved to be first [&] **forced his will on others** ...He was not content to deny hospitality himself to the traveling missionaries...;he also stopped others from doing so. If anyone went against him..., he put them out of the church... **Such action represents an abuse of leadership responsibility** ." (Colin Kruse, *Op Cit* , p. 185)

e. He does evil in doing all this (v. 11a)

a. "The Elder seems...to have in mind here what the Johannine tradition elsewhere says about how those who have seen Jesus have seen the Father (Jn. 14:9). Those who do evil, however, have chosen darkness over light (Jn. 3:19; 9:39, 41). They cannot see Jesus... **Diotrephes has chosen to do evil, & his behavior results in his inability to see Jesus** . Gaius, if he continues to choose what is good, will show that he is of God. The...way in which the phrase is crafted shows that **these are not realities into which people are immovably placed**. **Gaius chose well in the past, & he needs to choose well again** . The choice of showing hospitality to missionaries or rejecting them is a choice with serious implications." (George L. Parsenios, *Op Cit* , pp. 161-2)

5. Demetrius, a Traveling Christian Worker, Arrives at Gaius' Church (3 Jn. 12)

6. Final Words (3 Jn. 13-15)