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A0505 -- Jan. 30, 2005 – 3 John 1-4 – Commendation of Gaius

Introduction

This epistle is often overlooked by Christians because it's so short. Paul has a single sentence in Ephesians 1:3-14 which is almost as long as this entire letter. 3rd John contains only 218 words. How significant could 218 words be? Would we really be missing anything if we had only 65 books rather than 66? Well, if all Scripture is God-breathed and sufficient for every good work then all 66 books must be essential revelation concerning the Christian life (2 Tim 3:16-17). 3rd John is therefore essential revelation. When we take a close look at the letter we will find that it has some unique features about it that help clarify the biblical form of church government. Additionally the letter addresses the issue of supporting traveling missionaries. Who to support is revealed in 3rd John (5-8, 11-12), who not to support is revealed in 2nd John (7-11). So, this epistle, though short, is certainly essential revelation and an essential part of what makes the totality of Scripture sufficient for every good work.

1st, 2nd, and 3rd John have been called by some “one-eyed John”, “two-eyed John”, and “three-eyed John” because each book looks at a related theme from a different eye (i.e. perspective). All three letters include the themes of “truth” and “love”.

- 1st John → “Promoting Fellowship by Avoiding Sin, Walking in Love, and Maintaining True Doctrine”
- 2nd John → “Protecting the Truth by Rejecting False Doctrine”
- 3rd John → “Partaking of the Truth by Supporting its Representatives”

But 3rd John is unique in that it addresses the issue of church government. Some churches have a form of church government where there is one elder and a plurality of deacons. This would be the Baptist-congregational system. The pastor is the one who fills the office of elder. Other churches have a plurality of elders and a plurality of deacons but one elder dominates the others. Not necessarily by design but in practice. 3rd John argues strongly against either of these two forms of church government. One man should never take a

dominating role in governing the church to the point where everything is going his way. In the case of 3rd John, a man named **Diotrephes** had taken a domineering role, seeking to have the pre-eminence (v. 9). If he was an elder, which it seems he was (v. 10), and there were other elders they needed to do something about it. If he was a layman then the elder(s) needed to do something about it. Something needed to be done because this man was prideful and selfish and leading in the wrong direction. So, this book shows the danger of setting one man up or allowing one man to dominate the affairs of the church. The consistent biblical model is a plurality of elders all with one equal vote (Phil 1:1; Tit 1:5). The function of an elder is to provide general oversight in every area under the authority of the local church and to guard the truth (1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:17; 1 Pt 5:3).

Author

The author of 3rd John does not reveal his name explicitly. Traditionally the epistle has been assigned to John the Apostle although some held that John the **elder** was a different man than John the Apostle. The similarities between 1st, 2nd, and 3rd John are too abundant to make such a distinction (1 John 2:7 with 2 John 5; 1 John 2:18, 4:1-3 with 2 John 7; 1 John 2:23 with 2 John 9; 1 John 3:6, 9 with 3 John 11; 2 John 1 with 3 John 1; 2 John 4 with 3 John 3-4; 2 John 12 with 3 John 13). There is hardly any room to dispute the early tradition that John the **elder** is none other than John the Apostle and that John the apostle authored all three epistles. Therefore, John the Apostle authored, in his own hand (cf. v. 13), this small, but essential epistle. Here John refers to himself as **the elder** (v. 1). The Greek word translated **elder** is *presbuteros*. This word had three basic meanings: 1) an older man in the community, 2) an office, first in Judaism and later in Christianity, and 3) a grandfather figure. The third sense is conveyed here. John the Apostle was well-known to his recipients and he addresses them as a “gentle grandfather would address his grandchildren” (cf. *beloved* in vv. 2, 5, 11). John had the right to refer to Himself as an “apostle” which would emphasize his authority. But there is no reason for John to assert his authority over close friends (v. 15). In the same way a doctor does not require his friends to preface his name by Doctor so John does not require that his friends address him as “apostle”. He simply uses the gentle address, **elder**. Three things are clear from the title **elder** that 1) the recipients knew John, 2) that John was mature in the Christian faith, and 3) that John held the office of elder. It is possible that John

was on a visiting circuit to several churches in this region. Therefore he hoped to come soon and settle the matter (vv. 10, 14).

Recipient

The letter was sent **to the beloved Gaius**. The name **Gaius** is mentioned four times in the NT. Gaius of Derbe (Ac 20.4); (2) Gaius of Macedonia (Ac 19.29); (3) Gaius of Corinth (Ro 16.23; 1 Cor 1.14); and (4) Gaius of 3 Jn 1. **Gaius** was a very common name in the 1st century much like John or Michael is today.ⁱ Therefore it is difficult to identify the **Gaius** of 3rd John with any of the others mentioned in Scripture. Some have identified this **Gaius** with the **Gaius** of Corinth because he was “a host to Paul and to all the Church” (Rom. 16:23).

Where is **Gaius** located? Tradition claims that **Gaius** was ordained by John as the first “bishop” at Pergamum.ⁱⁱ This would fit with the fact that John wrote letters to the 7 churches of Asia Minor (Rev 2-3), of which Pergamum was one (Rev 2:12-17). John’s title of **elder** may serve to indicate his responsibility to those churches. The most we can say for certainty is that **Gaius** may have been a part of one of these 7 local churches, Pergamum being the most likely. The other churches under John’s watchful eye were situated at Ephesus, Smyrna, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, or Laodicea, all of which are situated in Asia Minor.

Date

It is difficult to determine the date of this epistle. There is very little internal evidence and there is no external evidence for a particular date. The two basic views are that it was written between 60-65AD or 96AD. An increasing number of scholars, including myself, are dating this book between 60-65AD. Those who hold to the late date of 96AD, suppose that John was on the island of Patmos, having been banished by Emperor Domitian, and wrote it about the same time he wrote the Book of Revelation. There is little evidence in support of this. The support for an early 60’s date recognizes the striking similarities of the letters [see under **Author**] and all presuppose that the apostles were still alive (**we** in 1 John 2:18-19 [cf. Acts 15:24]; 2 John 8; 3 John 9 refers to the apostolic band). This would force them to be written before 70AD. No mention of Jerusalem under attack pushes it even earlier, probably between 60-65AD. It seems then that one courier, perhaps **Demetrius** (3 John 12), carried all three letters to their destinations in Asia Minor on the same trip. The issue in 1st John was the danger of false teachers in destroying fellowship. The issue in 2nd

John was the danger of supporting false teachers in their ministries. The issue here in 3rd John is the benefits that come from supporting true teachers in their ministries.

Situation

The Players

Four major people are mentioned in this letter and one group of people. The four major people are **John** the Apostle (**the elder** v. 1), **Gaius**, **Diotrephes**, and **Demetrius**. **Gaius** and **Demetrius** display good examples and **Diotrephes** displays the bad example. One group is mentioned in this book under the title **brethren**. This was a formally recognized group in the early church known as the *wandernde Glaubensboten*. They were a group of traveling evangelists.

The Problem

John received a report from these traveling evangelists about some trouble at this local church (v. 3). Being an **elder** and having responsibility for this church he was compelled to write to **Gaius**, a member and perhaps an elder of the church. Apparently, a man named **Diotrephes** was dominating the church by insisting on having everything his way. The trouble arose when a group of traveling evangelists (i.e. *brethren*, vv. 3, 5, 10) visited the church. This group of **brethren** was a formally recognized institution in the early church (known as the *wandernde Glaubensboten*). They sold themselves strictly to the gospel ministry, abandoning all for Christ's sake. To avoid misrepresentation they took nothing from the Gentiles—no food, lodging, or money (v. 7). Therefore, John says we are supposed to support these groups so that we might become fellow workers of the truth (v. 8). But **Diotrephes** set an evil example when he rejected a previous letter from John the apostle that endorsed these traveling evangelists (v. 9). Against apostolic authority **Diotrephes** proceeded to refuse to help the traveling evangelists and he forbade others from doing so by excommunicating them from the church (v. 10)! The traveling evangelists had reported to John that **Gaius** had set a good example by walking in the truth, demonstrating faith and love. **Gaius** had obviously shown heart-warming hospitality to the traveling evangelists on their visit. **Diotrephes** did not kick **Gaius** out of the church, perhaps because of **Gaius**' excellent reputation or for some other reason that would have stifled his desire for pre-eminence. Whatever the case, when the traveling evangelists departed they reported back to John all that happened. Their report contained the good actions of **Gaius** and the evil actions of **Diotrephes**. As a result John wrote this letter, not to **Diotrephes**, but to **Gaius**. It would do no good to send a letter to **Diotrephes** because he had already rejected a letter from the apostles once before (v. 9). Therefore, John would work through **Gaius** who was a close friend of John and had demonstrated orthodoxy and

hospitality to the traveling evangelists. In this letter John commends a Christian brother unknown to **Gaius**, known as **Demetrius** (v. 11-12). **Demetrius** would be coming soon as a traveling evangelist and John wanted **Gaius** to know that **Demetrius** should be supported. He was a man of truth and character therefore he should be supported. The letter was then sent by John either through the hand of **Demetrius** or ahead of **Demetrius** by someone else to **Gaius**.

So, 3rd John is the case of a domineering personality who seeks pre-eminence in the church, a power-monger who forces everyone to conform to his will, pushes people around, rejects authority, and does not support orthodox itinerant ministers.

Outline

- I. **Salutation (1)**
- II. **Body of Letter (2-12)**
 - A. **Commendation of Gaius (2-4)**
 - B. **Gaius Encouraged to Support Orthodox Traveling Ministers (5-8)**
 - C. **Condemnation of Diotrefes (9-10)**
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- III. **Farewell (13-15)**

COMMENTARY

I. **Salutation (1)**

Verse 1 reveals the author, the recipient, and the relationship.

Greek Text 1 **O presbuteros Gaio to agapeto, on ego agapo en aletheia.**

Translation 1 **The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.**

The author calls himself **the elder**. This is the same way he addressed the dear lady of 2 John 1. John the Apostle is an **elder** and he chooses to address his audience as a “grandfather would address a grandchild”, in a gentle, yet mature way. He is clearly a friend of the recipient **Gaius** and many who are a part of this church as revealed in v. 15 “*The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.*” There is therefore no reason to remind his readers of his apostolic authority. They are fully aware of his apostleship. But to deliberately call it to mind would set the wrong tone for the letter.

The recipient is a man named **Gaius**; perhaps the **Gaius** from Corinth who was a great help to Paul and the whole Church (1 Cor. 1:14; Rom. 16:23) or perhaps another **Gaius**. **Gaius** was a very popular name in the 1st century.

The relationship between John and **Gaius** is signified by the phrase **whom I love in truth**. **Gaius** was obviously a very dear Christian brother. The word for **love** here is *agapao*. This kind of **love** is not a familial love (*storge*), lustful love (*eros*), or friendship love (*philia*; cf v. 15) but an affectionate Christian love shared between believers. This type of love always desires God's will for the other person. It desires the highest good in the one loved. It is not a self-seeking or selfish love but a giving, unconditional love. How do we know what this love is? Turn to **1 John 3:16-19** "*We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us*". Christ gave His perfect human spirit and human body as a substitute for our sinful spirits and bodies. How can we love others as Christ loved us and as John loved **Gaius**? "*we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren.*" Many of us will not have the opportunity to die for a Christian brother, but what we can do is demonstrate the same spirit of willingness to die for a Christian brother by following verse 17. "*But whoever has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need and closes his heart against him, how does the love of God abide in him?*" It is not enough to simply say we will lay down our lives for our brethren. We must demonstrate our willingness to do so by providing for the physical needs of fellow Christians. Providing for physical needs helps them survive. This is why John exhorts us in verse 18 not to merely "*love with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.*" We must desire the highest good for our fellow Christians and act on that desire when needs arise. We can't just talk about it we must do it. When we do it verse 19 will be the result "*We will know by this that we are of the truth, and will assure our heart before Him*". This is where John was in his relationship with **Gaius**. He loved him in the sphere of truth. We might say John loved **Gaius** as Christ loved us. That's what it means to love someone **in truth**. When we actively provide for the spiritual and physical needs of fellow Christians we are loving them in the truth.

II. Body of Letter (2-12)

A. Commendation of Gaius (2-4)

Greek Text 2 *Agapete, peri panton euchomai se euodousthai kai ugiainein, kathos euodoutai sou he psuche.*

Translation 2 *Beloved, concerning all things I pray you to prosper and to be healthy, just as your soul prospers.*

John addresses **Gaius** as **beloved** (also in vv. 5, 11). This underscores his love for **Gaius**. John has been and is praying that **Gaius'** physical well-being will match his spiritual well-being. The prayer has two requests. *First*, that **Gaius** might **prosper**. The Greek word for **prosper** does not necessarily mean material prosperity. What it means is that John prays that **Gaius** would “get along well” in the world. **Gaius** had clearly been getting along well as trials and tribulations came his way. John prays that this would continue to be the case. “A good knight is best known in battle, and a Christian in the time of trouble and adversity”; and Gaius had stood the test.”ⁱⁱⁱ John prays he would continue to stand the test when future traveling evangelists visited town. It appears that **Gaius** met this test as evidenced by the fact that this letter has been preserved. Indeed, the same Holy Spirit who inspired the letter enabled **Gaius** to meet the test of remaining hospitable to traveling evangelists even in the midst of the dangerous **Diotrephes**. Had **Gaius** not met the test he probably would have gotten rid of the letter. *Second*, John prays for **Gaius to be healthy** in proportion to his spiritual prosperity. **Gaius** is clearly doing quite well spiritually but he has poor health; perhaps some chronic ailment or a health problem induced by the stresses caused by **Diotrephes**. Whatever the case, it is clear his health problem is not a product of sin for he is doing very well spiritually. John’s prayer is that **Gaius'** physical well-being will rise to the level of his spiritual well-being. This is a unique prayer in that most prayers in Scripture are for the spiritual well-being of others. Here the prayer is for the physical health of a strong Christian.

In our generation, and I don’t hesitate to say in most, our prayers emphasize the physical, temporal realm without mention of the importance of our spiritual, eternal realm. This is no doubt due to an over-earthly perspective. In our culture the tendency is to focus on the here and now which means large concern for the body over the spirit. Penn, in his *Fruits of Solitude* says, “He is curious to wash, dress and perfume his Body, but careless of his Soul. The one shall have many Hours, the other not so many Minutes.”^{iv} What need is there to spend so much time worrying about and dressing up the body? It is one thing to be concerned about *kemptness*, it is a wholly other to be *self-infatuated*. Too often rigor mortis has set in on the spiritual character of many Christians. Their bodies are a pleasure to the eye but their spirit is all but dead. Many Christians mirror the scribes and Pharisees of Christ’s day. Christ said of them, “*Woe to you...hypocrites! For you are like whitewashed tombs which on the outside appear beautiful, but inside they are full of dead men's bones and all uncleanness*” (Matt. 23:27). If we pay too much attention to the body we will not have anything to look forward to. Pour time into developing your spiritual well-being because the body is bound to decay and fall apart. Set your mind, heart, and time on heavenly things where neither moth nor rust decay rather than on the material things.

Fortunately, in **Gaius'** case the tables were reversed. He was doing quite well spiritually but his health was poor. Therefore, John prays that his physical health would match his spiritual health. It is interesting that many have suggested that if the same prayer were made (and realized) for some of the spiritually decrepit Christians in our churches, they would immediately be rushed to the hospital!^v

Greek Text 3 echaren gar lian erchomenon adelphon kai marturoun ton sou te aletheia, kathos su en aletheia peripateis.

Translation 3 For I was exceedingly glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, *that is*, how you are walking in truth.

This verse signifies that John has received a report from the traveling evangelists. “The itinerant brethren...were always at work, going out...on their missions and returning with their reports.”^{vi} The report testified of **Gaius'** outstanding Christian conduct. His conduct, his lifestyle was consistent with the truth. This is the *aim of sanctification, to learn loyalty to God's word in every area of life, to live in accordance with God's revelation*. It's not enough to know the truth we must also live the truth. **Gaius** was one such Christian who embodied the essence of Christian doctrine and conduct. The report said that **Gaius** walked **in truth**. This means the **truth** of God's word was in **Gaius** in a dynamic way so that he obeyed God's commands. He had learned to be an “abiding” disciple of Christ. The basis of **Gaius'** conduct is his orthodox doctrine. Apart from right doctrine you cannot have any sustained obedience. **Gaius** had obviously spent years assimilating and straightening out his doctrine and the report has come back that this doctrine has taken hold and is working itself out in his conduct.

It seems apparent that these traveling evangelists (brethren of v. 2) had come to town and needed a place to stay, food, and help on their departure. Knowing the warnings of 2 John **Gaius** had tested these prospective guests for orthodoxy. He would not want to be a partaker of evil deeds. Therefore, he tested them. This means he found out if they believed in the deity of Christ, he found out if they believed in the virgin birth, he found out if they believed in the redemptive work of Christ. Once he found out that these traveling evangelists were sound in doctrine and not false teachers then he welcomed them into his home and provided food, lodging and provisions for their return journey.

This is the kind of witness we ought to have when we invite itinerant ministers to our church. We ought to put them up in a nice hotel or in someone's home, provide food and provisions for their ongoing journey. We want to help support those who are like-minded and disseminate the truth because when we do we become fellow workers with them of the

truth (3 John 8). We want to beware of deceivers, false teachers and we don't want to support them lest we be found partakers of their evil deeds by propagating Satanic doctrine (2 John 10-11).

Greek Text 4 meizoteran touton ouk echo charan, hina akouo ta ema tekna en te aletheia peripatounta.

Translation 4 Greater joy I have not than these things, namely that I hear my children are walking in the truth.

One of the greatest things a spiritual father can hear is that his spiritual children are **walking in the truth**; that they are taking to the streets what they learned in the classroom. To see Christians being obedient to God's commandments brings the greatest kind of joy imaginable, not only for earthly spiritual fathers but for our heavenly Father as well.

This opening commendation of **Gaius** would be spiritually uplifting and would encourage him to be obedient to John's later request in vv. 6, 8, 11, 12.

ⁱ The name Gaius may have come from the Doric form *geios* which meant "on land" (Liddell-Scott Greek Lexicon).

ⁱⁱ Nicol, Robertson, *The Expositors Greek Testament; Volume Five* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 164.

ⁱⁱⁱ Nicol, Robertson, *The Expositors Greek Testament; Volume Five* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 205.

^{iv} Nicol, Robertson, *The Expositors Greek Testament; Volume Five* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 205.

^v Hodges, Zane, *The Epistles of John* (Irving, TX: Grace Evangelical Society, 1999), 279.

^{vi} Nicol, Robertson, *The Expositors Greek Testament; Volume Five* (Hendrickson Publishers, 2001), 205.

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