

That You May Know

*And by this we know that we have come to know him, if we keep his commandments.
(1 John 2:3 ESV)*

*We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love the brothers.
(1 John 3:14 ESV)*

*I write these things to you who believe in the name of the Son of God,
that you may know that you have eternal life.
(1 John 5:13 ESV)*

Leadership In A Time Of Theological Crisis

December 6th, 2020

3 John

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bible with you and that you are able to open it now to 3 John verse 1. As I mentioned last week, 2nd and 3rd John are the shortest documents in the New Testament. They are about the same length as each other, possibly because the same scribe wrote them both – each on a single page of paper.

Some scholars even suggest that these letters were written on the same day. Richard Lenski for example says here:

“the two letters were probably written on the same day and were sent to the same place, the second to the congregation, the third to one of the members”¹

F.F. Bruce envisions a slightly more extended timeline. He agrees that the two letters were sent to the same church but he doesn't think they were written on the same day. He thinks that the messenger who delivered 2 John was BLOCKED or REBUFFED in some way by this person we will meet called Diotrephes. He says – concerning 2 John:

¹Richard Lenski as cited by David Jackman in *The Message of John's Letters*, ed. John R. W. Stott, The Bible Speaks Today. Accordance electronic ed. (Downers Grove.: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 190.

“the letter failed of its intended effect because Diotrephes, a dominant personality in that church, forbade his brethren to comply with the Elder’s request.”²

So John then writes 3 John to Gaius – another leader in the same church – so as to ensure that this congregation receives the original instruction contained in the circular letter – 1 John – and the reinforcement contained in 2 John. Thus, this letter – 3rd John - is the Apostle John doing an end around this difficult and dysfunctional person named Diotrephes.

That’s what going on here – whether it all happened on the same day, or over the course of a couple of weeks hardly matters, the point is that we are basically reading the narrative minutes of a particularly nasty church conflict. And that’s important for us to understand. Such things happen and these letters have been preserved because they demonstrate wise and persistent Christian leadership in a time of theological crisis.

Hear now the Word of the Lord, beginning at verse 1:

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

² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, as it goes well with your soul. ³ For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as indeed you are walking in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

⁵ Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶ who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth.

⁹ I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church.

¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹² Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

² F.F. Bruce, *The Gospels & Epistles Of John*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 152.

¹³ I had much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink. ¹⁴ I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.

¹⁵ Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, each by name. (3 John 1:1–15 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Well as mentioned above this letter represents some urgent pastoral instruction from the Apostle John to a reliable Christian leader named Gaius in a time of theological crisis.

Urgent Instruction In A Time Of Theological Crisis

He says three things in this short and PERHAPS hastily penned epistle. The first thing he says is this:

1. It is important for churches to support worthy Gospel workers

That's the main point that John has been trying to get across. You can see that in verses 5-8:

Beloved, it is a faithful thing you do in all your efforts for these brothers, strangers as they are, ⁶ who testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷ For they have gone out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸ Therefore we ought to support people like these, that we may be fellow workers for the truth. (3 John 1:5–8 ESV)

In essence, this is the MIRROR image of the point John was trying to make in 2 John verses 10-11:

If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into your house or give him any greeting, ¹¹ for whoever greets him takes part in his wicked works. (2 John 1:10–11 ESV)

So DON'T support UNHELPFUL Christian teachers and DO SUPPORT those who continue to proclaim the Apostolic Gospel. That's one of the main responsibilities of a local congregation and it is a direct fulfillment of the charge given by Christ himself in Matthew 10:41:

The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward. ⁴² And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly, I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward." (Matthew 10:41–42 ESV)

So when we support faithful Gospel workers – from the greatest to the least – whatever support we give them will be received as if given unto Christ himself and we will by no means LOSE OUR REWARD.

That's exactly what John was trying to say in his second Epistle – which was BLOCKED apparently by this arrogant and domineering local leader named Diotrephes.

And that takes us to the second thing John feels compelled to stress in this letter:

2. It is important for churches to reject domineering local leadership

Look again at verse 9-10:

I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church. (3 John 1:9–10 ESV)

So who was this Diotrephes character? Our best reconstruction here is that Diotrephes was ONE of the LOCAL LEADERS in this church – the earliest pattern seems to have been that churches were ruled by a plurality of elders – so Diotrephes was almost certainly one of those elders. But it appears that he had a disproportionate amount of influence in the church – he was able to BLOCK messengers sent by the Apostle John and he was able to “put out” members who attempted to receive those messengers. That would seem to suggest that the church was meeting in his house and that created a leadership challenge that the Apostle John had to deal with.

And of course churches have been dealing with this kind of problem for 2000 years.

When I was a young pastor working at a church plant our offices were originally in an office building owned by one of the elders of the church. He was also one of the primary givers in the church and that gave him an outsized sense of his own authority. He eventually became a major problem. He tried to hold the senior pastor hostage to his own personal views and preferences and we had to separate from him as a congregation. That was a bit of trauma. It involved moving our offices and downsizing our budget – but it had to be done because you cannot allow major donors to hold the entire church hostage to their particular opinions and demands.

So John does an end around. He sends a letter to another leader – Gaius – and he says: “Bypass Diotrephes. Get my letter before the people. Get my messenger before the people and I will come and deal with Diotrephes personally when next I pass through the region.”

John’s rule was simple – if you didn’t recognize his authority as an Apostle then your forfeited your voice and your authority in the local congregation.

The Apostle Paul had the same rule. He said:

If anyone thinks that he is a prophet, or spiritual, he should acknowledge that the things I am writing to you are a command of the Lord. ³⁸ If anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized. (1 Corinthians 14:37–38 ESV)

It is the authority of the Apostles that is ultimately definitive in the church – and any local leader who argues against that authority or who would position himself as a rival to that authority is not to be listened to.

The third thing John is eager to stress here is how important it is for churches to promote positive Christian role models to their people.

3. It is important for church to promote positive Christian role models

You can see that in verses 11-12:

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. We also add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true. (3 John 1:11–12 ESV)

Most scholars assume that Demetrius is the messenger who delivered 3 John. In essence this then is the Apostle saying: here is the person that you should be looking to as an example of a faithful, godly, Christian leader. This is the sort of person you should be supporting. His message is the sort of message you should be listening to.

That middle bit in verse 12 is hard to make sense of – what does it mean that Demetrius has received a good testimony “from the truth itself”? Some say that means simply that “his deeds tell the truth about who he is”. That’s possible. After all Jesus did say:

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶You will recognize them by their fruits.” (Matthew 7:15–16 ESV)

So a teacher’s life and ministry should, over time, tell you the TRUTH about who he is and where he comes from.

So that could be it.

But some scholars think it means, actually that JESUS HIMSELF – who is THE TRUTH testifies on Demetrius’ behalf. Jesus did say:

“I am the way, and the truth, and the life. (John 14:6 ESV)

So that could be it as well – but either way the point is the same. Jesus has been TESTIFYING to the trustworthiness of Demetrius by blessing his ministry and causing it to bear fruit and therefore YOU GAIUS need to give him your support and you need to make sure that HIS VOICE is being heard in the church.

That's the idea – and that's the message in this very short little letter known as 3 John. And that brings us to the end of this particular section of Holy Scripture – and what a section it has been! The Apostle John has been providing a Master Class In Christian Leadership In A Time Of Theological Crisis, so I thought it might be helpful if we attempted a sort of summary of everything we've learned thus far.

Leadership In A Time Of Theological Crisis

The first leadership lesson that stands out to my mind is this; John's insistence that his churches always:

1. Err on the side of continuity

We've used the analogy of "lane keep assist" a number of times throughout this series. John has been saying: **STICK** to the old paths! Don't take that off ramp! **REMAIN** in the faith once for all delivered to the saints!

That's what John wants – and that's what makes John happy as a spiritual father. Colin Kruse says helpfully here:

"In all three letters of John the author's joy is said to be complete when the readers maintain fellowship with him and walk in the truth (1 John 1:4; 2 John 4; 3 John 3–4)"³

So **ERR** on the side of continuity!

Before you embrace a new idea or a new doctrine or a new take on something ask yourself this question: Did faithful, fruitful, Bible believing, Jesus loving Christians believe this 100 years ago? 500 years ago? 1000 years ago? 2000 years ago?

Because if the answer is **NO** then somewhere along the way, your group has taken a wrong turn. Repent.

³Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 221.

John is not an advocate of theological novelty. On the contrary, he says:

Everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. (2 John 1:9 ESV)

It boggles my mind when evangelicals are eager to refer to themselves as “progressives”. Given what John says here – I’m not sure you that’s a helpful label, because it is very clear that John is telling his people – his churches, his friends, his fellow elders – to ERR on the side of continuity.

So Christians need to stop asking: “does this align with what my friends and neighbours believe”? That’s not a good question. You ought to be asking: “does this align with the Apostolic Gospel”? Full stop. End conversation. Because there are no other legitimate considerations.

That’s what John is saying – and that’s good counsel in a time of theological crisis.

The second lesson I think for us is this. In a time of theological crisis, good Christian leaders are going to:

2. Remind, reinforce and reassure

One of the main takeaways for me from this series has been how much repetition and reinforcement there was between the Gospel of John and the Epistles of John – and how much reinforcement there was between 1 John and 2 John.

John did not feel the need to reach far and wide for new ideas or concepts to address the crisis of the hour. He just restated, reapplied, reinforced and reassured.

And there is a lesson in there for us.

We don’t need new doctrines – what we need is deeper understanding and more appropriate application of OLD DOCTRINES.

That was John's perspective – and it was Peter's perspective as well. He said to his people:

This is now the second letter that I am writing to you, beloved. In both of them I am stirring up your sincere mind by way of reminder,² that you should remember the predictions of the holy prophets and the commandment of the Lord and Savior through your apostles (2 Peter 3:1–2 ESV)

So moms and dads, pastors and elders, friends and neighbours – no matter what type of leader you are, be assured of this: what your people need to know is not something NEW. You don't have to invent new truths or new perspectives to help your people navigate through these troubled times. You just need to understand the Apostolic Gospel. That is the foundation – and everything must be built up from there. On that pattern. With no deviation or change.

That's how you build a house, a family, a church and a mission that will endure.

The third leadership lesson here I think is this:

3. Don't be afraid to call a spade a spade

Now I had to ask Pastor Matt if young people today still use that expression and he laughed at me, actually, which I thought was unkind, but he said that while they don't use the expression anymore, they do know what it means.

It means to tell it like it is – and sometimes as a leader you have to do that.

Some of what John says in these letters is quite alarming. He doesn't pull his punches. He says:

They went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us. But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us. (1 John 2:19 ESV)

That's a firm word. Everyone who went out from us is a heretic. They are not saved. They are not Christians – and now we all know that.

That's a pretty bold statement.

But sometimes you have to make pretty bold statements – particularly in a time of theological crisis. These folks had crossed a line – and it was a pretty significant line! They weren't believing anymore that Jesus Christ was TRULY GOD and TRULY MAN for the entirety of his earthly ministry – well that's not ok. That's not true – and that's not Christian. And John said as much.

And he said some hard things here in 3 John as well. He said that Diotrephes was arrogant, overly assertive and obstructionist. That's not terribly nice either is it? And yet, it had to be said. And John said that he would say it again when next he was with them in person. He said in verse 10:

I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us.” (3 John 1:10 ESV)

John was prepared to ruffle feathers from time to time if it was in the best interests of his people.

A few years ago I had a few folks upset with me because when I preached on one of the several passages in the Bible that mention the need to flag and avoid false teachers, I decided to apply that by publishing a list of 12 contemporary teachers that our people would be wise to avoid. Well, not everyone appreciated that – but I went back this week and looked up that list and I can tell you right now that I am glad that I gave you the warning that I did. Every single name on that list has given FURTHER EVIDENCE that they are not reliable voices and that they should not be consulted by any Gospel loving people in this church.

Sometimes you've got to call a spade a spade – so moms, dads, pastors, elders – no matter what kind of leader you are, in this culture, you have to be prepared to steer your people away from toxic and ruinous influence.

And of course the flip side of that is that you need to be active and intentional in promoting positive influence:

4. Promote positive examples

On that same handout that I distributed in 2013 I provided a list of RECOMMENDED TEACHERS and authors. I gave 6 historical and 6 contemporary and once again, I stand by that list – I wouldn't change a single name. There were no scandals or embarrassing revelations on that list. They looked fruitful and faithful then – and they look all the more so now.

If you want the list you can email me and I'll get it to you.

I consider this part of the job. I think pastors today, just like in John's day, have a responsibility to support and promote reliable messengers, helpful voices and trustworthy examples of Christian life and ministry.

The fifth lesson I think is this, and we'll end here; we need to:

5. Trust the Holy Spirit to do the work that only he can do

John consistently assumes that real believers are going to recognize the truth of his counsel and submit to it. He says that at the end of this letter:

“you know that our testimony is true.” (3 John 1:12 ESV)

You know.

Well how can John know that Gaius knows?

And the answer is that John KNOWS that Gaius is walking in the truth – he is a real believer. He says that in verse 1 and verse 4. So if Gaius is a real believer then he has the Seed of God in him; he is filled with the Holy Spirit, and therefore the Holy Spirit will confirm John's testimony in Gaius' heart.

John has been saying stuff like that in all of these Epistles.

He said back in 1 John 5:7-8:

For there are three that testify: ⁸ the Spirit and the water and the blood; and these three agree (1 John 5:7–8 ESV)

So John had given his testimony as to the water and the blood – he says: “I was there! I was an eyewitness to the death of Jesus Christ upon the cross and I can verify that he was a flesh and blood MAN when he died. He was no mere Spirit. He was no apparition! When he died – I saw the water and the blood!!!”

And then says: and the Spirit adds his testimony to the truth that I have told you.

The Spirit CONFIRMS in the hearts of real believers the truth of the Apostolic Gospel! Christians have always believed that at the end of the day, a person will ONLY be fully and finally convinced of the truth IF the Holy Spirit is operating on the inside of that person and catching and applying and pressing the Word that washes over them.

Our grandparents believed that.

In the original Baptist Confession it says:

“our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth, and divine authority thereof, is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the Word in our hearts.”⁴

And of course that belief is way older than our grandparents – it goes all the way back to Jesus himself. Jesus in John 15 said to his Apostles – said to John:

“But when the Helper comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth, who proceeds from the Father, he will bear witness about me. ²⁷ And you also will bear witness, because you have been with me from the beginning.” (John 15:26–27 ESV)

So Jesus assured John that when John bore witness the Holy Spirit would confirm that witness in the hearts of real believers. There would be a sort of “voice recognition software” installed in them such that they would always be able to tell whether the things they were being told accorded with the true Apostolic Gospel of Jesus Christ.

⁴ The Baptist Confession Of Faith, Chapter 1, paragraph 5.

John obviously believed that because he never doubted that all of the TRUE BELIEVERS in his churches would receive and respond to his instruction.

So that changes the way you CONTEND for the truth in troubled times. You don't have to overwhelm, you don't have to HAMMER DOWN, you don't have to scream and shout – you just have to preach the whole counsel of God. And if you do that – then false believers will self-select. They will go out from us because they are all not of us – but the real believers will remain behind and be encouraged. They will be built up. They will be strengthened. They'll be reassured. Because they have the anointing of the Holy Spirit – and therefore they know the truth when they hear it.

The grass withers and the flower fades but the WORD of our Lord shall STAND forever. Thanks be to God, let's pray together.