

New Testament Survey for Beginners: Part 25 – 3 John

Once again John introduces himself as “the Elder”, and, since he was the last remaining apostle, he was probably well known by that title. He addresses this third letter to a man named Gaius, someone about whom we know nothing at all except what we may glean from the letter itself. Gaius is a Christian gentleman whom the apostle regards very highly and wishes every blessing upon him, materially, physically and spiritually.

Gaius appears to have been a man of position and influence in his church. Unlike 2 John, which was a letter of warning against giving hospitality or any kind of encouragement to false teachers, 3 John commends Gaius for showing such hospitality to itinerant preachers who proclaim the true gospel of Jesus Christ and who receive no similar support from other sources. Let the former action be strictly prevented and the latter wholeheartedly promoted.

Believer, we should all be aware of the biblical injunction to pay our tithe and give our offerings to the local church (Malachi 3:10; 1 Corinthians 16:2), but are we also aware of the equally pressing need to support this same ministry in so many other ways, as in prayer, hospitality and with every word of encouragement? We can too easily think that the mission of the local church and its outreach to the outside world begins and ends with the work of the office-bearers, but in point of fact every church, the body of Christ in its own location, depends on the input of all its members if it is to serve the Lord effectively.

John had previously written this same church, but Diotrephes, a churlish man who had it seems an even greater measure of influence than Gaius in that same covenant community, would not receive any of the travelling evangelists whom this apostle had wanted to send among them. More than that, Diotrephes exercised what power he deemed himself to possess to remove members from the church who sought to give those same friends of John even the hospitality they requested. The apostle realizes that this is a matter too important to set aside, and so he informs Gaius that when he comes to them himself, as he hopes to do soon, he intends to report what Diotrephes has done and the malicious words he has spoken. This is a matter for church discipline, and it is Diotrephes who should be removed from church membership if he does not repent.

We do not know how Gaius fared in all this, whether he was a subject of Diotrephes' attack, but he is instructed not to imitate his evil example. Let him follow, rather, the much better and God-honouring example of Demetrius who had the wisdom and courage to do what was right. This, beloved, is a much-needed word of caution for us all. People who profess to be Christians but love having the preeminence – serving themselves rather than Christ, determined to go their own way at the expense of everyone else – will in a short time reveal their true nature and demonstrate that they are not of God. Their life, manner and unaccommodating attitude are as detrimental to the congregation as the false teachers who willfully seek to lead God's people astray.

Now it is easy enough of course to point out what someone else is doing wrong, but are we as ready to pick up on similar traits in ourselves? We may profess faith in Christ, for instance, but do our actions betray an arrogance which denies that very One whom we claim to serve? Are we so insecure that we must always be right, that we must put others down in order to build ourselves up? Do we forget that faith works through love? O beloved, we are the chief of sinners, every one of us, and no better than anyone else. Yes, we are to put down false teaching, not allowing any trace of it to enter our doors, but at the same time the ministry of those who preach the truth as it is in Jesus is to be humbly received, prayerfully supported and gratefully promoted. Those who are duly appointed to preach Christ and demonstrate that He is to them preeminent in all things are to be welcomed and honoured among us for their work.

This letter closes in much the same way as the previous letter. John looks forward to visiting Gaius and to the joy of speaking with him face to face. He adds a greeting of peace, and he asks, in turn, that he might be remembered to all his other friends in the congregation by name. With John, let us never allow the corruption of one or two in any church to spoil the reputation of others or lessen the appreciation that we should have for them.

Rev. Tom Aicken

