



The Third Epistle of John: The Cost of Walking in the Truth

The Revd Stephen Motyer, Lecturer in New Testament at London Bible College, concludes his series on the 'Little Epistles' of the New Testament.

Gaius stepped out into the courtyard of his house to greet the stranger whose 'Hello - anyone at home?' he had just heard. There stood a young man with the open, pleasant smile of a brother in Christ, but carrying nonetheless a rather nervous air. 'Are you Gaius? I bring you greetings from our beloved Elder, John. My name is Demetrius.' It struck Gaius as strange that Demetrius thrust a letter straight into his hand, rather than exchange the customary kiss of peace. Greetings from John, the Elder himself! He couldn't think why the Elder should be writing to him. He had not long been a Christian himself, and so had not attained any exalted rank in the Church which he had joined in the nearby town. There, the leadership was firmly in the hands of Diotrephes, and Gaius had not been invited to join the circle of elders. He was not in fact sure that he would wish to! Diotrephes was a difficult person to deal with. In any case, Gaius was so thrilled with his new-found Lord that all his energy and attention were taken up with learning to serve Him.

He turned the letter over in his hands before opening it. He had never actually met John the Elder, but had heard so much about him when he first became a believer. He was an apostle, one who had actually been with Christ, and a witness of His death and resurrection. He was now an old man, living in Ephesus, the much-revered father of all the believers in Ephesus and its hinterland. All the roads led down to the coast at Ephesus, and Gaius himself depended upon the busy life of that metropolis as a market for the produce from his farm. So it was natural that churches like his should look for guidance to their mother-church in Ephesus, founded by the great Paul, but pastored now by the aged John. Gaius had occasionally given hospitality to some of the believers from Ephesus, for John the Elder took pains to ensure that links between his churches were kept up, and frequently sent out ministers to preach and teach in the smaller country churches. Gaius naturally assumed that Demetrius was one such. But why no kiss?

Recently he had been both puzzled and pained by some disparaging remarks made by Diotrephes about the great Elder. He had thrown them off in the middle of a sermon as if everyone would know what he was talking about. Gaius had just been completely surprised - but lately Diotrephes seemed to be more and more taken up with himself and his sermons had been getting rather strange. Could this letter have anything to do with that? Gaius glanced at Demetrius, smiling but obviously nervous, then broke open the seal and began to read. The letter was not long - just one papyrus page. But by the time he had finished Gaius knew that he was standing at a turning-point in his Christian experience. He knew too why

Demetrius had not offered him a kiss of peace when he arrived. *What should he do?* For a moment he hesitated, thinking of Diotrephes and his fellow-elders through whose ministry he had been brought to know the truth and received his first nourishment in Christ. But then he turned to Demetrius. 'Greetings, dear brother in the Lord! The Elder commends you most warmly in his letter! My house is at your disposal!' - and they kissed each other.

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I am convinced that some such scene was played out when 3 John arrived at its destination. Some people idolise the Early Church, and give the impression that, if only we could be like they were, we would solve all the problems facing us today. But they were just like us: divided, reluctant, inconsistent disciples - even though they had an apostle in person to guide them! What was the decision that faced Gaius that day? A truly painful one, and one which has been taken with equal pain many times since then, and still is today. How do you cope with division between Christians? In a situation in which no course of action seems acceptable, and somebody is bound to be upset, what principles and priorities should guide us? When should we regard fellowship as having irretrievably broken down? 2 John deals with the same problem, but in more global, theoretical terms. 3 John tackles it from an intensely personal angle.

In fact the same situation probably underlies both letters. John was deeply disturbed by the spread of false teaching in his churches (see the last issue of *Evangel* for details). All three epistles of John arise out of this painful situation, I believe, and in 3 John we see part of John's tactic for recalling one particular church which has sadly fallen under the spell of the new doctrine. For in all likelihood Diotrephes had been infected by this teaching, although John never mentions this (in fact it is not germane to the challenge he is placing before Gaius). Who was Diotrephes? He was clearly a rather domineering elder, who was taking the reins of the church very much into his own hands: 'loves the pre-eminence', is John's verdict (v.9). Now he is trying to steer the church away from loyalty to

John. Looking at it with a historian's eye, you can either say (with some) that Diotrefes represents the beginning of the slippery slope away from congregationalism to the monarchical episcopate with which the Church has been plagued ever since the beginning of the second century, or (with others) that he illustrates precisely the problem from which episcopacy is designed to protect the Church! You pay your money, etc. Either way, he faces us with the problem, What do we lesser mortals actually do when the leaders of our churches seem to depart from the truth or otherwise go off the rails? And in a nutshell the answer is, *We go on doing good, regardless of the cost, and we stay faithful to the apostolic Gospel.*

Vv. 1-4 Opening Salutation and Commendation

This little letter builds up slowly towards its punch-line. The revelations about Diotrefes in vv. 9-10 must have taken Gaius's breath away, but the real 'point' of the letter does not appear until vv. 11-12. Everything else leads up to that. So this opening greeting is warm and gentle, and just drops a few quiet hints about what is to come. We notice again the close connection between love and truth which we saw in 2 John. Gaius is addressed as 'beloved' no fewer than four times (vv. 1,2,5,11) and we see that this is no conventional address from John's assurance in v. 1, 'whom I love in (the) truth'. For John, the truth has not been grasped unless it manifests itself in love, and the only way in which love can be imparted is through the heartfelt embracing of the truth. He feels himself bound to Gaius by precisely this love.

His prayer for Gaius in v. 2 sounds conventional (it was customary to begin letters with a prayer or wish for the health for the recipient), but in fact is deeply genuine. John's concern for him extends not just to his spiritual well-being but touches his physical health and material well-being as well, for his material prosperity is highly relevant to the challenge later to be issued! (Gaius is going to be asked to put his hand in his pocket - but he doesn't know that yet). John has heard of Gaius' spiritual prosperity from various 'brethren' who have visited Ephesus and passed on news (v. 3). All the main translations give the impression that John has heard this just from one party of visitors, but in fact the use of the present participle in v. 3 makes it clear that he has frequently heard talk of Gaius' 'walk in the truth'. And the same point appears also in v. 4, which begins (literally) 'I have no greater joy than these, to hear . . .'. The 'these' plainly refers to the repeated occasions on which he received such news - particularly about Gaius.

Again we see the distinctive Johannine understanding of 'truth' - it is not just something to be known, but is also something to be done.

V. 4 is truly amazing. All the joys of heaven itself - which for an old man of John's spiritual stature might be expected to be very vivid! - pale into insignificance beside the joy of hearing that his 'children' are 'walking in the truth'. That is true Christian love. And again we see the distinctive Johannine understanding of 'truth' - it is not

just something to be known, but is also something to be done. The one who 'walks in the truth' exhibits a consistent, day-by-day coherence between profession and action, between inner and outer life, in commitment to the Truth which is Jesus. Gaius is about to be faced with a challenge to his consistency.

Vv. 5-8 Mission and Hospitality

John expands what he has just said about the 'brethren' who have told him about Gaius. It appears that they are particularly those to whom Gaius showed hospitality. Such hospitality was the life-blood of the Church at this time, for it was both the means whereby resources were provided for the carrying on of mission, and a cementation of fellowship between separate cells of the Church. We see it in action in Paul's case, for instance in Acts 21:3-6, where Paul and his companions land themselves (literally) on the disciples in Tyre, stay for a week, and then are sent off with a great procession down to the beach, doubtless laden with provisions for their journey. The treatment Paul received then is exactly what John both praises Gaius for having already provided, and urges him to continue providing. Paul too urges the Romans to 'pursue' hospitality (Rom. 12:13), and Peter puts his finger on the nub of the matter when he commands hospitality 'without grumbling' (1 Pet. 4:9)! For the sort of treatment lavished on Paul in Acts 21 must have set the believers back a pretty penny. But it must be given, because such *self-giving* is the essence of the Gospel.

'You do a faithful thing', John tells Gaius (v. 5): the showing of hospitality is a vital expression of faith, binding giver to receiver in one cause. It is Gaius' duty to 'send them on their way in a manner worthy of God' (v. 6b). John uses the same word that Luke uses in Acts 21:5, where the believers in Tyre 'send Paul on his way' with generosity, tears, and much rejoicing. It means much more than simply accompanying the guests on the first stage of their journey (though it undoubtedly includes that). The host provides all they will need. To do this 'in a manner worthy of God' means that both guests and host are deliberately seeking to express their 'faithful' response to all that God has done for them in Christ: guests by ministering the word, host by providing material needs. The one is not less important than the other, for both are completely interdependent. How could one function without the other?

V. 7 gives the reason why the careful provision of hospitality is so necessary. Greek culture abounded with travelling philosophers and teachers of various sorts, who made a living out of peddling ideas or skills. Some were genuine, many were just charlatans. Common to them all was the principle that you had to pay to take the course of instruction they were offering. But Christian missionaries were different. Paul had established the principle of offering the Gospel free of charge wherever he went (1 Cor. 9:14-18): because the Gospel is about the free grace of God to sinners, it is therefore a denial of the Gospel to make people pay to hear it! Christian missionaries thus stood out from all other itinerant preachers, illustrating by their life-style the truths they were proclaiming.

But the Lord had clearly said, 'Those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel' (1 Cor. 9:14, cf. Luke 10:7). During his ministry in Corinth, Paul set this aside completely, wanting all his ministry to be

free of charge, and earned his own keep. But at other times (as at Tyre) he followed the normal application of the Lord's word, which was that missionaries should receive their whole support from the believers, to enable them to offer the Gospel free to outsiders.

This means that the supporters are 'fellow-workers for the truth' with the missionaries, as John puts it in v. 8. His words could be translated, 'fellow-workers *with* the truth', picturing the givers of hospitality as standing alongside and supporting the truth itself as it gains its hold on men's minds. It is all 'for the sake of the name' (v. 7), the name of Christ, in whom all the treasures of the truth are found, and who shows forth the great pattern of the life of self-sacrifice, reflected both in those who give up home and safety for itinerant preaching, and in those who sacrificially support them. John's gentleness appears in the 'we' in v. 8: he will not demand of Gaius anything which he is not prepared to take upon himself - although he more than any deserved and needed to be supported!

All this Gaius already knew, for he had already played his part with generosity. The Ephesian Christians had returned with glowing reports of his 'love' shown to them (v. 8), even though they were complete strangers to him (v. 7). Why then is John reminding him of it? The bombshell lands with the next paragraph.

Vv. 9-10 Diotrephes' U.D.I.

Diotrephes, John informs Gaius, has refused to read out in public worship a 'little something' from the great Elder. This amounts to a rejection of the Elder himself. John will not allow it to rest at that: he will come personally (v. 10 should be translated 'when I come ...', not 'if'), and will call Diotrephes gently to account for his misdeeds. He has been laying baseless charges against the Elder himself, and (far worse) refusing to offer hospitality to brethren from him, hindering others in the church from doing so, and actually expelling from the fellowship those who defied him and received the Elder's emissaries into their homes.

These two verses are a little puzzling. John seems to be telling Gaius what has been going on in his own church: would we not expect Gaius to know about this already? It would make more sense if the Elder asked Gaius what Diotrephes had been doing! But things fall into place if we imagine the situation as I pictured it at the start of this article: Gaius sits rather on the fringe of the church (perhaps because he lives at some distance from the town), holds no office in it, and genuinely does not know the full extent of what has been going on between John and Diotrephes. The situation described in vv. 9-10 could have blown up very quickly, resulting from a sudden decision of Diotrephes to switch sides in the doctrinal debate. This meant closing his doors to all representatives of the Johannine viewpoint, and exercising his full influence to purge the church of all sympathisers with John.

John is quite clear about the reason for all this. Diotrephes 'loves to be first' (v. 9, NIV), 'wants to be the head of everything' (J. B. Phillips), 'seems to enjoy being in charge' (Jerusalem Bible). The last is an understatement! Diotrephes has not taken this action as a result of an earnest search for the truth. He has seen in an alliance with John's opponents a chance to reinforce his own power and influence over the church. I believe that Gaius was horrified as he read this, discovering for the first time the reality

behind the few hints and suggestions he had picked up. It was far worse than he had ever imagined. And so we come to the climax of the letter, in which John gently makes clear to Gaius what he wants him to do.

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Vv. 11-15 Which Way Will Gaius Go?

Poor Gaius! If I am right, he was suddenly faced with a decision about his own allegiance. Will he remain loyal to Diotrephes, or will he repudiate Diotrephes' action and be loyal to the Elder? And in fact it probably boiled down to this: *will he greet Demetrius with the kiss of peace*, thus signalling his acceptance of him and his willingness to receive the Elder himself when he comes to sort things out? The final greeting raises this issue sharply. All the doors are open on the Elder's side - 'the friends here greet you: greet the friends there by name!' We must remember that some, at any rate, of the 'friends there' had already been expelled from the church by Diotrephes (v. 10b), and that if Gaius 'greeted' Demetrius then he would suffer the same fate! John is in fact asking him to join the church in exile and to gather the expelled believers around him, forming a fellowship faithful to John, from which the Elder could launch a counter-attack (although a military metaphor is hardly appropriate: John is so gentle, and all he says he will do is to 'call attention to' or 'bring up' what Diotrephes has done - v. 10a!).

Demetrius stands before him, recommended even by 'the truth itself' (v. 12): hold Demetrius up against the truth, and the likeness will be so obvious that no one could deny it. 'I hope to see you soon!' says the Elder (v. 14): if Gaius greets Demetrius, then he has in effect already welcomed the Elder into his home, and the aged John will make a painful journey from Ephesus to try to recall Diotrephes and his church to the truth, supported by the hospitality of the faithful Gaius.

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This must have been a truly painful decision for Gaius. There is in fact no evidence in the letter that he had been converted through the ministry of Diotrephes, as I suggested at the start. But it is a reasonable presumption that he had at any rate received much from Diotrephes in the past. All those who have felt compelled to separate from brethren in Christ because of insuperable obstacles to fellowship will know how he felt. One thinks particularly, in the British scene, of the Christian Brethren who in recent years have 'come out' from Exclusive Brethren fellowships in which they enjoyed deep spiritual nurture over many years. Such decisions are not easily taken. How can one be sure that a decision of this sort is rightly guided? Splits have often taken place within Protestantism for reasons

which, to outsiders, seem less than sufficient, considering the pain they cause and the dishonour to 'the name'.

John gives Gaius two principles on which to base his decision:

V. 11: The Moral Principle. Do what is *good*! This is so sane. Gaius must divorce himself from the tangle of emotions which could have clouded his judgement, facing a decision like this, and must consider as objectively as possible what *goodness* demands of him. Peter lays emphasis on precisely this same principle when seeking to guide the persecuted Christians of Asia Minor (e.g. 1 Pet. 2:12, 15, 20 etc.). When the heart is wracked by pain, the way to a clear perception of the path ahead lies not in weighing up relative feelings of loyalty, but in applying objective moral principles. John's use of the word 'imitate' is interesting: he does not simply say 'do'. When one's own judgement cannot cope, the best thing may simply be to rely on someone else's, and to imitate the decision taken by a respected father in Christ in similar circumstances. But that still involves a decision! That responsibility cannot be avoided. The question is - What is the *good* thing to do? Usually this will be modified to - What is the best thing to do out of several equally painful alternatives? This is doubtless how it appeared to Gaius.

But the question arises, How do we discern what goodness demands? What can guide our judgement effectively? For this we need

V. 12: The doctrinal principle. John reintroduces the theme of *truth* in v. 12, because goodness cannot be discovered apart from truth, and for the believer truth must be sought in certain specific places - in fact, in two places. Demetrius stands before Gaius, just glowing with truth. V. 12 is such a warm commendation. In the loveliness of his Christian character, a character in which the glorious truths of the Gospel have wrought their gracious work and formed Christ in him, Gaius will see the truth and realise that he cannot deny it. 'Everybody' agrees about it (v. 12a) - how could Gaius dissent?

The trouble is that he had also seen the truth in Diotrephes. He cannot have been always bad. This is, I think, why John adds v. 12b: 'we also bear witness to him, and you know that our testimony is true'. Just a little reminder of John's apostolic status, tempered by that gracious 'our', but clear nonetheless. For Christians, truth is ultimately located in the apostolic testimony. Demetrius displays the truth in his Christian character, but it is the apostles who guarantee to the Church the actual truths out of which such Christian character may grow. For they are the ones authorised by Christ to speak in His name, and their testimony is binding upon those who follow Christ. This is the vital principle which Diotrephes has jettisoned, and this is at the heart of his error. If John testifies on behalf of Demetrius, then Gaius must receive him, or injure his own soul! There is a fascinating parallel between 3 John and Philemon at this point: Paul makes it clear that he could lay down the law to Philemon, and command him to receive Onesimus back - but instead he appeals to him and leaves the outcome entirely in Philemon's hands (not even making it precisely clear what he wants Philemon to do!). So also John does not use the big stick which undoubtedly his apostleship placed in his hands, but just lays the facts before Gaius and lets him decide.

His letter has said enough. John rests upon the truth which he believes dwells in Gaius (v. 3), and looks forward to travelling out from Ephesus to enjoy Gaius' hospitality (v. 14). He wishes him peace (v. 15) - the sort of peace

enjoyed by those who are sure they are right with God, even in the midst of failing human relationships - and sends him the Christian greetings of his church. Gaius can be assured of a welcome among them! I am sure that John's appeal was heeded and Gaius embraced Demetrius when he had finished reading. Unfortunately, it is not clear whether John was able to recall Diotrephes and the rest of the church to faithfulness. On this, history is silent.

So how do we cope in situations of division between Christians? 3 John gives us some basic principles to work on:

1. Faced with conflicting loyalties, we must concentrate on the search for *goodness*. Loyalty alone can be a very bad guide.

2. Anything less than the full apostolic Gospel is not a sufficient cause for division. The basic problem was Diotrephes' rejection of John. The equivalent for us is the apostolic Gospel: where that has been jettisoned, it will be impossible for fellowship to continue. But in Common loyalty to that Gospel, the bonds of truth and love should hold us together. 1 and 2 John explain the core of that Gospel.

3. Confrontation is not the same as head-on conflict. John was intending to come to try to sort things out, but his language is very mild ('I will bring the matter up'), and we can imagine that his technique with Diotrephes would be the same as with Gaius; to make the issues crystal clear, then leave him to decide for himself. This is the technique that respects the responsibility of the person and the power of the Holy Spirit.

4. We need to take great care to keep the links and bonds of fellowship in good condition, so as to avoid the appearance of cracks which could develop into splits. This is difficult: Diotrephes went off the rails in spite of John's best endeavours to keep all his little congregations united by his travelling missionaries. But it is vitally important - and we must do it across denominational boundaries, I believe.

5. True discipleship is always costly. We see Gaius faced with two different sorts of cost: a material demand on his resources, to support John's rescue bid (and more broadly his travelling missionaries), and a personal cost, a call to sacrifice old friendships for the sake of the truth. In situations of division we experience this cost most particularly.

6. We can take encouragement from the assurance that we are never alone, if the truth dwells in our hearts! Gaius may have lost Diotrephes, but he gained Demetrius. Always there will be the precious jewel of hearts united in Christ, which nothing can take away.

continued from page 18

(and there are over 2 million shopworkers) can be sure on their day off that members of their family are also off work. It means the family can be sure of a day together.

Parliament has a duty to legislate on behalf of society and in the best interests of society. Christians have a responsibility for the welfare of their fellow man and therefore to argue on the broad principles of Christian morality that Sunday should remain as the Creator intended - a day available for worship, family, community life and service, and relaxation. These are essential in the long run to the physical and spiritual health of the nation.

Yours faithfully,

Christopher Townsend