

Truth and Hospitality

3 John

Turn to 3 John please. This Sunday we will read 3 John, and next Sunday 2 John. I've come to believe that 1, 2, and 3 John were written in the opposite order, 3 John written first, then 2 John, then 1 John.

Let's talk about that. The NT arranged letters first by the writer, and then by length of letter, longest to shortest. Paul wrote 13 letters. We first have 9 letters to churches, Romans to 2 Thessalonians, arranged longest to shortest. Then we have 4 letters to individuals, 1 Timothy to Philemon, also arranged longest to shortest.

We have in order 1 and then 2 Corinthians, 1 and then 2 Thessalonians, and 1 and then 2 Timothy. These pairs occur right after the other, and also in the right sequence as far as time goes. In each instance, we can tell from the letters that the 2nd was written after the 1st.

But when they arranged the letters, it is not clear that they cared about time. The first NT letter to churches was Romans, one of the last letters to churches Paul wrote; and 2 Thessalonians is the last NT letter to a church, and it was one of the first letters he wrote. And Paul wrote Philemon before the Timothy and Titus, but Philemon is the shortest, so it is last. Time does not matter.

It is not clear that 1 and 2 Corinthians, for example, would have been arranged one after the other, if they had not also been the 2nd and 3rd longest letters of Paul.

The two letters of Peter are also arranged longer then shorter. And 2 Peter speaks of an earlier letter, so we know that Peter wrote these two in that order. But it is doubtful that they cared about that.

So now we come to 1, 2, and 3 John. They also are longest to shortest. 2 Jn is a bit longer than 3 Jn. Commentators normally assume that they were written in the order we have them. But I read an essay not too long ago that said it made more sense to take 3 Jn as first, then 2 Jn, then 1 Jn was written the last of the three.

Ultimately it does not make any difference. Each of those three has its own message no matter how we order them. But if we take them in reverse order, it does make more sense, to me at least, and I will explain that.

It's a story about big trouble in this church. In 3 John, the problem is mostly one man who's trying to take over, he's mistreating people, and he's leading the church in a wrong direction.

That's 3 John. In 2 John the problem is bigger. Now the church is divided, some are walking in the truth, and some are not. There's a bit more teaching about this in 2 John.

In 1 John, the problem has gotten so bad that a group of people have left the church. 1 John 2:19 says this: *They went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.*

In 1 John, the faithful believers who stayed are confused and uncertain. John wrote 1 John, as he says near the end, *that you who believe in the name of the Son of God may know that you have eternal life.* So it seems best to take the 3 letters as describing a growing problem.

Also, at the end of 3 Jn, John writes, “I have more to say, but I don’t want to do it with pen and ink, I want to come and speak face to face.” At the end of 2 Jn he says exactly the same thing, I have more to say but I don’t want to write it, I want to come and say it directly.

Those two letters are short. 1 John is much longer. For whatever reason, John cannot go there to speak face to face, so he must put it all down with pen and ink. He was probably frustrated, but it has been very good for us to have this letter. In 1 Jn he wrote what he wanted to say face to face.

So we will go through 3 John today, the beginning of the trouble, and next week 2 John, where things have gotten worse.

Gaius and the Truth – vv1-4

The elder: To my beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well. It gave me great joy when some believers came and testified about your faithfulness to the truth, telling how you continue to walk in it. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

In Acts and Paul, we read about the “gospel,” the good news. John likes to speak about “the truth.” It is all the same message, the story of God sending Christ into the world.

But where Paul thinks, “finally we get the good news,” John thinks, “finally we get the truth.” “The truth” and “the gospel” speak of the same thing, but calling it “the truth” gives it a little different flavour. John likes it that after all the deceit and blindness in the world, God sent Jesus to finally tell us the truth and actually to *be* the truth.

John loves Gaius “in the truth,” John enjoyed others believers telling him about Gaius, that Gaius was “faithful to the truth,” and that Gaius continued to walk “in it, in the truth.” John has no greater joy than to hear that his children “walk in the truth.”

John does not much care if you or I *agree* with the truth. John wants people to be *faithful* to the truth, and *walk* in the truth. The truth is not asking for agreement. Agreeing with the truth does not matter. The truth wants *loyalty*, that we’d be *faithful* to it; and the truth wants a *way of living*, that we would *walk* in it. Gaius walked in the truth.

Hospitality to Brothers and Sisters – vv5-8

When Jesus sent out his disciples, he told them not to take money along, or extra clothes. He said labourers had earned their wage, workers had earned their care. If his disciples preached and healed, then someone in the town would give them food and a place to stay, and new sandals if the old ones wore out. They had earned this and had a right to it.

In the NT churches, this kind of hospitality was important. If a believer was travelling through town, the believer would find the church in that town, and someone in the church would give the believer supper and a bed.

And if the travelling believer was travelling for the Lord in some way, the church would take them in, give them a place, and also give them enough money to get to the next church. And that church would take them in, and give them money to reach the next town with a church.

There were pretenders of course, people who just wanted free lodging. But Paul's letters often gave a character reference for the person carrying the letter. 3 John has that in v12. John gave a character reference for Demetrius. Demetrius carried 3 John to Gaius, and John spoke well of him, so that Gaius will know Demetrius is not a free-loader. This was all standard. Let's read.

Loved-One, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on, in a way that honors God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

Gaius showed this hospitality to some messengers that came from John, messengers that Gaius had never seen before, complete strangers to Gaius, but he knew they came from John, and he was good to them. And John urges Gaius to send them on in a way that honours God. That means, make sure they have enough food and supplies to continue, so your actions fit our God.

In the paragraph before this, John wrote that Gaius was faithful to the truth, and that he walked in the truth, and that it gave John joy when he heard that his children were walking in the truth. That paragraph, about Gaius walking in the truth, and this paragraph, about Gaius's kindness to believers he'd not seen before, his love and hospitality to them, *speaks about the same thing*.

Gaius walked in the truth, and Gaius showed love and generosity to believers: these are two ways of saying the same thing. It was his love and kindness to visiting believers that showed he was walking in the truth. That defines walking the truth.

Walking in the truth is the *theological* description of how Gaius lived. His love and kindness to brothers and sisters is the *practical* description of how Gaius walked in the truth.

And when people work for the sake of the truth, and we care for them like this, we are co-workers with them. By helping these people, we ourselves work for the truth, just as they do. This is John, but Paul uses the word “partner” the same way. We don’t just *support* them and *help* them, we actually become *partners* and *fellow-workers* with them. We join their work.

That Diotrephes – Vv9-10

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to be first, will not welcome us. So when I come, I will call attention to what he is doing, spreading malicious nonsense about us. Not satisfied with that, he even refuses to welcome other believers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church.

Diotrephes, a man in the same church as Gaius, pulls the other way. John wrote something to the church, a letter we don’t have. Diotrephes worked against it. We get six bits of information about Diotrephes. One, he loves to be first. It is an old problem, and a big problem in churches. James and John the apostles wanted to be more “first” in the kingdom than the other ten apostles.

Paul told the Ephesian elders, in Acts 20, that some of those elders in front of him would distort the truth *in order to draw away their own disciples*. Peter told elders not to lord it over anyone, but to lead by example. Diotrephes wanted to be first, the big problem started there.

Two, He will not welcome “us,” which means he will not welcome John’s messengers (as Gaius had done). Three, he is spreading malicious nonsense about John and his messengers. Four, he treats other believing servants the same way, not just John’s messengers.

Five, he works against those who do want to welcome and help them, people like Gaius. And six, he works to put those like Gaius out of the church. It is not clear in this last line if Diotrephes is actually putting these people out, or only trying to. Translations differ on that. He is at least trying to put hospitable people out of the church.

So Diotrephes, apparently in leadership, loves to be first, and wants no part of John or John’s letter or John’s messengers, he’s trying to take control of the church. He does not like it that old John has such a respected voice in that church, and you can see that a big division in the church is not far away.

John writes to ask Gaius to welcome his messengers, as Gaius has done in the past. It may well be a private letter to Gaius, because if it was to the whole church, it might not get read.

Final Advice to Gaius v11

Loved-One, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.

Do not imitate what is evil, Gaius, don't use those methods, don't ever do business like that, have nothing to do with that way of living. People who do what is good are from God, Gaius. Anyone who does what is evil, and that surely includes Diotrephes, has not seen God. Wow.

We're not used to speaking so all or nothing about people. But John and other NT writers as well, and Jesus himself, were much more willing to speak like that.

By this definition, Gaius is from God and has seen God. Diotrephes is not from God, and has not seen God. If we saw people who lived like Gaius, we would appreciate and respect them.

Would we say that Gaius was "from God?" Perhaps. Would we say that Gaius had "seen God?" Probably not. But old John tells us that if someone lives like that, they have seen God in some essential way. That's living in the truth. Truth is not something to agree with. It is something to live, as Gaius lived it, walking in the truth.

Closing: vv12-15

Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.

The early church was careful about its hospitality. They had an eye open for pretenders who were just moochers. So Demetrius will be the one who carried this letter to Gaius, and this line tells us that John, who does not lie, says Demetrius is a believer in good standing with every believer that know him, and even the truth itself commends Demetrius.

This is John giving Demetrius a ticket to welcoming hospitality from Gaius.

I have much to write you, but I do not want to do so with pen and ink. I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face. Peace to you. The friends here send their greetings. Greet the friends there by name.

Hospitality

Truth and love and hospitality are tied together here. "Truth" is used 8x in this short letter, and "love" 7x, and the truth and loved are lived out in believers welcoming and serving one another.

This letter gives us a clear call to welcome and help believers from other churches, especially those who "go out because of the Name." Welcoming and helping them makes us fellow workers in the truth, which in this letter is as good as it gets.

Let's widen hospitality. I heard a woman speak about hospitality. She had moved from Canada to South America when she was a child, and then as a young adult she had moved back to Canada.

In both cases she felt completely lost and alone in the new country and culture. Neither new country was felt kind to her, and she much appreciated people who did welcome and help.

So hospitality became a big theme in her life. She urged us to be hospitable everywhere. She urged us to be hospitable to our spouses, and she urged us to be hospitable to our children. She had adult children who did not always make her life easier. Parents can be like that too.

She wanted to be hospitable to her children, and her husband. Hospitality is just love with a particular flavour. Hospitality means “make room.” We make room for guests, make room at the table. We could make space for our spouse, our parent, our children, one another in this church. It is a kind of love. We accommodate them.

Sometimes these people feel like strangers, why should I welcome them? Why? Because we walk in the truth. Let’s welcome one another, and make room, and serve them. And as you know, it is much easier to make room for a visitor who comes and goes than to make room for someone we live with. The truth hopes we’ll make this a way of living.

But if we do this, then we walk in the truth, and the truth itself commends us. If we do this, we are from God, and have actually seen God in some essential way. And that’s pretty good! Amen.

PRAYER: O God, this is a lot easier for me to preach than it is to live. I can do this only in such small doses. Have mercy on me, and on us all. We do love you very much, and your call here is clear enough. And God, these things do happen among us, we do welcome and make room, it happens with believers we’ve not seen, and it happens in our homes.

You have been hospitable with us, O God. We were strangers, enemies actually. You made room for us, you welcomed us, took us in, you feed and clothe us, you made us your children, and put us in your will, promising a great inheritance. And you are building a permanent place for us. Since we have seen this from you, lead us to do this for others. And that would be walking in the truth. May the God who calls us be faithful, and may he see it done. Amen.

(response)

BENEDICTION: Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God’s peace, to love and serve the Lord.