

The Epistle of Third John

Introduction:

- I. It's a simple fact that some who obey the gospel eventually wonder away from the truth.
 - A. This is as much an issue today as it was during the first century church.
 1. When we read the letters written to first century churches, we see they also struggled with those who fell away from the Lord.
 2. This was especially true in one of the smallest letters in the entire New Testament – John's 3rd letter – known today as 3rd John.
 - a. Unlike many of the letters in the New Testament, 3rd John was a private letter between the apostle John and a Christian named Gaius.
 - b. This letter is unique about in that it not only provides us with a portrait of three men, it also provides an inside look at one particular church in the latter part of the first century.
- II. What is the background of this letter?
 - A. The author simply identifies himself as "the Elder."
 1. Most conservative biblical scholars believe the author was John – the apostle best known for his deep love for Jesus.
 2. The term "elder" seems to be referring to John's advanced age rather than describing the office of an "elder" – although it's interesting to note that some of the "Patristic Witnesses" from the second and third centuries speak of all the apostles as "elders."
 - B. The recipient of this letter was "the beloved Gaius."
 1. Gaius was a common Roman name at the time and is found five times in the New Testament.

2. This Gaius was a close friend of "the elder" – John – and is best known for his hospitality.
- C. The date and place of this letter is somewhat uncertain.
1. Most believe the letter was written sometime in the last few years of John's life – probably 96-98 AD – either shortly before or possibly after he wrote the book of Revelation while imprisoned on the Island of Patmos.
 - a. The writings of the "Patristic Witnesses" indicate John was released and returned to Ephesus after the death of Domitian (d. 96 AD), at which time he apparently penned 1, 2, and 3 John.
 - b. Patristic Witnesses also claim that John lived in Ephesus during the latter years of his life.
- D. The purpose of this letter is most important.
1. John writes to encourage his friend Gaius by reassuring him that he had done the right thing in financially supporting traveling teachers who had come his way.
 - a. John wanted to encourage Gaius to continue this generous hospitality (3 Jn 5-8).
 2. John also wanted to express his indignation and condemnation of a man in the church there known as Diotrephes.
 - a. Diotrephes had not only rejected John, but also rejected those teachers whom Gaius had financially supported (3 Jn 9-10).
 3. Finally, John encouraged Gaius to continue imitating what is good – pointing to a brother called Demetrius as an example worth following (3 Jn 11-12).

Discussion:

- I. The three men who are the focus of this letter.
 - A. Gaius.
 1. To describe much Gaius meant to John, the aged apostle prayed that Gaius would prosper in all things – materially, physically, and spiritually (3 Jn 1-2).
 2. It's easy to see why John thought so much of Gaius:
 - a. Gaius had a great reputation (3 Jn 3a).

- b. Gaius lived a life in harmony with the gospel of Christ (3 Jn 3b).
 - 3. Gaius brought great joy to the heart of the aged apostle when John heard of his faithfulness (3 Jn 4).
 - a. Gaius was hospitable toward everyone (3 Jn 5-6a).
 - b. Gaius personally provided gospel preachers with financial support (3 Jn 6b-8).
 - B. Diotrephes.
 - 1. Unfortunately, here was a man who wanted to be in control of everything – he apparently saw the church as his own.
 - 2. Look at some of the attributes of this man.
 - a. He was a defiant self-promoter (3 Jn 9).
 - b. He slandered others (3 Jn 10a),
 - c. He was vindictive – he would deny fellowship to certain brethren who came from other congregations and disfellowshipped those who did receive them (3 Jn 10b).
 - 3. The character of a man like Diotrephes should serve as a warning (3 Jn 11).
 - C. Demetrius.
 - 1. This man serves as a pattern worthy of imitation.
 - a. Perhaps this is why John encouraged Gaius (3 Jn 11a).
 - 2. The reason Demetrius served as a wonderful example is clear (3 Jn 12).
 - a. John says Demetrius had a good report:
 - (1). From all the brethren – everyone who knew Demetrius could only say good things about him
 - (2). From the "truth" itself – meaning the Word of God testified to the character of this man because he lived in harmony with the gospel.
 - (3). From John and the other apostles.
- II. Final comments.
 - A. John's farewell in this letter is similar to the final comments in 2 John.
 - 1. He preferred to pay these disciples a personal visit rather than write everything in a letter (3 Jn 13).

2. He closes by wishing them peace and urges them to greet one another by name.

III. Lessons from 3rd John.

- A. Not member of the Lord's church is the kind of person the Lord expects them to be.
 1. However, we are expected to continue serving and living a faithful life in the face of opposition from some of our own brethren.
 2. Unfortunately, this kind of opposition occasionally becomes too difficult for some tolerate.
 - a. They will either let the opposition stop them from being effective in their service to the Lord and to their brothers and sisters in Christ.
 - b. Or they will become so discouraged that they leave the church – feeling betrayed and abandoned by their own brethren and even abandoned by God.
- B. This letter shows that we imitate others – either for good or for bad.
 1. Obviously, we should imitate the "good" we see in others.
 2. In fact, John gives us two reasons for imitating the good we see in others.
 - a. First, those who do good are of God.
 - b. And second, those who do evil do not even know God.
 3. Gaius obviously chose to imitate the good example he saw in Demetrius.
- C. This letter shows that some Christians allow the "spirit of Diotrephes" to reign in congregations.
 1. The reason Diotrephes was successful in dominating that church is because brethren allowed him to take control.
 - a. They would not stand for the truth by standing against this man.
 2. The success of Diotrephes was due to a climate of complacency and cowardice within that church.
 - a. Sometimes brethren are willing to keep the peace at all costs – even when it means they must let someone dominate the congregation through fear and intimidation.

3. Churches cannot allow sin and rebellion to go unpunished simply because a few do not have the courage to stand for what is right.
 - a. Silence is always implied consent.
4. However, we must be certain that those from whom we are withdrawing fellowship have clearly sinned.

Conclusion:

- I. The letter of 3 John has an important message for all Christians today.
 - A. In one way or another all three men (Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius) set an example that others followed.
 1. Perhaps the most important question we can ask ourselves as we go through this study is whether our example is worth following.
 2. In one way or another we're setting an example – we're influencing someone in our life. What kind of influence is it?
 - a. Do they see us as a strong, faithful Christian who always puts the Lord first?
 - b. Do they see us as one who is always faithful and regular in your attendance – who never misses an assembly of the saints unless there was absolutely no other choice?
 - c. Do they see us as one who lives a life that models the life of Jesus Christ – where they can truly see Jesus in you?
 3. If that is not the example we're setting, then we need to do something about it – immediately.

Review Questions:

1. Why does John identify himself as "the elder"? (v 1).

2. Who was Gaius? (v 1).

3. What was John's prayer for Gaius? (v 2).

4. How had Gaius demonstrated his generosity? (vs 5-8).

5. Who was Diotrephes? (v 9).

6. What three things did Diotrephes do that John condemned? (vs 9-11)
 - a.

 - b.

 - c.

7. Who was Demetrius? (v 12).

8. What commendation did John give Demetrius? (v 12).

9. How does John conclude this letter, and how is it similar to his previous letter (2 Jn 12-13)?