

The Epistles Of II And III John (Part Two)

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The apostle John's travels and experience were extensive by the time he wrote his three epistles. In Acts 8:14, the apostle John is associated with the apostles who were at Jerusalem. Paul calls him one of the "pillars" of the Jerusalem church in Galatians 2:9.

By the time the apostle John wrote his epistles we find that he has had a vigorous life of pastoring and teaching the churches of God in his travels to various areas of Asia Minor, particularly Ephesus, and Europe, especially Gaul.

Now the French tradition that Mary, the mother of Jesus, journeyed into Gaul, which is now the general region of modern France, and resided there for a time, lends weight to John's having been in Gaul in his earlier years following the timeframe of the book of Acts.

It was John to whom Jesus committed Mary's care as the scripture states: "From that hour that disciple [John] took her to his own." But at times, he was a hunted man, so he probably was not able to personally care for Mary at all times. Sometimes, he would have had to relinquish her personal care to someone else. Now it is quite reasonable to expect that John turned to Mary's uncle Joseph of Arimathea who would have had the means and necessary protection to care for Mary on a daily basis when John was unable to.

There are several documents that lead to this conclusion. One reads: "St. John, while evangelizing Ephesus, made Joseph Paranympfos." *Paranympfos* means "the Guardian" so it is suspected and believed that Joseph of Arimathea was the guardian of Mary.

Now at least some of the time Mary would have been where John spent part of his time working, and that would be in Gaul, an area settled by the house of Israel, and as I said, an area now called France. It makes no sense that John would not have carried out a substantial witness in Gaul since it is a definite location of part of the house of Israel, and also because there is no record of any of the other apostles having gone there, which leads credence to John having preached and pastored in that area for at least a time.

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Apart from Revelation 1, the New Testament is silent about his later years, but early Christian tradition uniformly tells us that he left Jerusalem, probably not long before its destruction in A.D. 70, and that he ministered in and around Ephesus, the principle city of the Roman province of Asia, which he made the headquarters of His later ministry. At 90 years of age John was seized and banished to the Isle of Patmos.

Revelation 1:9 I, John, both your brother and companion in the tribulation and kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was on the island that is called Patmos for the word of God and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.

Now the seven churches in the Roman province of Asia, one of which being Ephesus, John's headquarters, mentioned in Revelation 2 and 3, were evidently a part of his ministry. Although there is no specific group that I John is addressed to, it is likely that the apostle directed his first epistle to the Asian churches that were within the realm of his oversight, with the intent that it be helpful to the churches of God beyond that day all the way down to our day as well.

John lived a long life and died close to 100 years of age. Some of the early disciples of John have left it on record that on his release from Patmos he returned to Ephesus where he fell asleep and died. He was the only apostle apparently that was not martyred.

The parallels between II and III John suggest that these two epistles were written at about the same time which would be around early to mid-90s A.D. II John was written by John the apostle in the late 1st century to warn against the same false teaching that he wrote about in I John.

This letter however was addressed to the church of God in the manner one would address a Christian woman and her family, as I mentioned in my first sermon. It is focused on truth in love and Christian hospitality. False teachers were using the kindness of Christians to gain influence within John's congregations. John's letter spoke of this danger and warned against opening one's home to these destroyers of the faith.

So while the basic themes of I John: holding fast to truth, love, and obedience are evident, there is the additional focus in II John on what Christian hospitality is all about. John says, it is only when you find agreement on sound doctrine that you will find meaningful fellowship.

As we continue from my last sermon to look specifically at II John, we find that the

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words of the apostle Paul in I Corinthians 10:12: "Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall" could very well stand as a subtitle for John's short epistle of II John.

Let me give you a brief synopsis of II John here. The recipients of John's letter were obviously standing and walking in truth, they were stable members of God's church and they were remaining faithful to the commandments they had received from the Father. John is deeply pleased to be able to commend them, but he takes nothing for granted. Realizing that standing is just one step away from falling, he does not hesitate to issue a reminder to love one another. Now John admits that this is not new revelation, but he views it as sufficiently important to repeat as we do in our services.

He stresses here that loving one another is equivalent to walking according to God's commandments. The unique feature of II John is John's emphasis on truth, and the linking of the truth with love. This direct link suggests that those who love the truth naturally have a love for others. We must be honest about our statement that we love someone, otherwise, we are liars and the truth is not in us. John stated this in other words:

I John 4:20 If someone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, how can he love God whom he has not seen?

John's primary purpose changes beginning in II John 7, which is where I left off in my last sermon. He delivers here a warning not to associate with or assist teachers who do not acknowledge the truth about Jesus Christ and His work. And we are especially to avoid those who deny that Christ came in the flesh.

This is a doctrinal encouragement. No one can have a true relationship with God the Father and His Son Jesus Christ without living according to the teachings of Christ.

II John 7-11 For many deceivers have gone out into the world who do not confess Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is a deceiver and an antichrist. Look to yourselves, that we do not lose those things we worked for, but that we may receive a full reward. Whoever transgresses and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ does not have God. He who abides in the doctrine of Christ has both the Father and the Son. If anyone comes to you and does not bring this doctrine, do not receive him into your house nor greet him; for he who greets him shares in his evil deeds.

This should make us cringe. Now having been told of the threat outside and warning them against it, John now gives instructions by which the danger itself may be countered. His instructions have two parts. First, he challenges us to be on our guard particularly where our own thoughts and attitudes are concerned. “Watch out” is what he says, because if we let down our guard we may be deceived and as a result of that we may well lose all we have worked for.

The nature of the deceit is suggested by the term translated as “transgresses” in verse 9 in the KJV & NKJV; in the ESV & NET Bibles it is translated as “goes on ahead”; in the NIV it reads “runs ahead”; in the NASB it is “goes too far”; and in the in the NLT it is “wanders away from.” In Greek it is the word *proagoon* from the two words “forward” and “to lead.” It means to proceed in place and time.

So at this point we see that verse 9 is saying that whoever runs ahead or wanders away from and does not abide in the doctrine of Christ, meaning in the truth, does not have God. This is a very powerful statement here.

The only truly idiomatic translation of the Greek word *proagoon* in English is “progressive,” but we must understand that the word is used both in irony and in one sense only. It is important to note that John is not saying that there is never to be any form of progress in Christian circles. Clearly much of the Bible is written precisely to that end, and even this letter is written to encourage such progress.

On the other hand, there is a type of progress that is not progress at all. It is movement that is actually a movement away from the basic truths of the faith and is therefore satanically detrimental. Today, the far-left liberals call themselves “Progressives.” Hillary Clinton, for example, has stated publicly in the media that she is a “Progressive.” This helps us to understand the attitude involved here. What is this present leftist movement doing? It is moving as far away from the truth as it possibly can.

This is what John is against and precisely the reason why he expresses the warning so strongly, because the movement presents itself as a great step forward and may therefore entrap the very people who most want to go ahead spiritually. John is speaking to the members of the church, but it is interesting how these things apply so much to the world as well. In fact, the world often does it first, then the church is influenced by the same weaknesses.

There is a true progress in the Christian life, but it is progress based on a deeper knowledge and understanding and application of the doctrines of Jesus Christ. Progress

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on any other ground may be called progress, but it is a progress that leaves God behind and is therefore not really progress at all.

This truth is extremely relevant to today's religious scene because the danger today is in precisely this area. The danger is not so much in false religion, or in any political system like communism, socialism, or any other obviously anti-Christian system, rather the danger is in that which goes by the name of Christianity but which excludes the true Christ. It is in religion and morality without the true God and the Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ.

The second part of John's instructions to the local church reveals how strongly he feels about this danger. Because this is where Christians are not only warned, they are also instructed to have no part in encouraging either the false teachers or their false doctrines. In fact, John says, "do not even greet them because in doing so you may be sharing in their evil work."

Now the very vehemence of this warning has caused some Bible commentators to object, arguing that it is hardly necessary, or right, for a Christian to refuse even to speak to someone whom he regards as being a false teacher. They reason that it is not satisfactory merely to refuse to have anything to do with false teachers. They go on to say that we can never compromise with mistaken teachers, but we are never freed from the obligation of seeking to lead them into the truth, if the opportunity arises and they are of a mind to receive the truth willingly.

In a sense this is expressing and emphasizing tolerance. But this is not what John says. Here we are helped by a careful analysis of John's teaching. First, we must note that John is not talking of all error but only of that which comes under the guise of Christianity. In other words, his expressions here cannot be used as the basis of a refusal to talk to non-Christians or to speak with adherents to another religion or philosophical system.

Second, he is not referring to all those who are in error within Christianity, but only to those who are teachers of such errors in the name of Christianity. John is speaking of those who promote false teaching in an effort to turn someone away from the truth. All others should presumably be loved and instructed. Now third and finally, he is not referring to all teachers who err but only to those who are in error on the most fundamental truths and who are actively proclaiming their heresies.

Obviously, being human, there is no teacher who is 100 percent free of error, yet we encourage them and learn from them. It is only when a professing Christian teaches the

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most anti-Christian doctrines that we are to deal so firmly. These heretics are clearly seen in their attacks on other ministers of God and in their efforts to dilute and change doctrine on a large scale.

If at this point the words still seem harsh, it can only be that John's concern for Christ and His glory is greater than ours and that our so-called tolerance is in reality just an indifference to truth and a misunderstanding of true love. You can recall the Worldwide Church of God, what the Tkach's did, they changed and perverted the truth in a big way and tried to convince others it was right. Those are the type of individuals that this is talking about here.

Now moving on, John makes it clear that his letter is only a prelude to a pastoral visit that he hopes to accomplish soon. Such a personal visit would make his joy complete. Now here in II John 12-13 is John's farewell greeting

II John 12-13 Having many things to write to you, I did not wish to do so with paper and ink; but I hope to come to you and speak face to face, that our joy may be full. The children of your elect sister greet you. Amen.

John has many more things he could write, but he hopes to visit his readers soon and talk "face to face." In I Corinthians 13:12 Paul writes this phrase literally "face to face," which in the Greek is: "*prosoopon pros prosoopon*." Here in II John 12 the words are literally "mouth to mouth" which in the Greek is: "*stoma pros stoma*." Both of these refers to a face-to-face encounter.

John states here that being face to face is of relatively greater value and much more desirable and effective than the mere writing of a letter. A letter is good, but it can be terribly misunderstood, particularly when difficult things are being said. We experience this somewhat today with the sending of emails. How often do people get upset with a toneless, thoughtless text message? It is far better for a personal visit and the personal word.

Now the three major lessons to take from John's second epistle are: 1) We must willingly and enthusiastically receive the love of the truth, that we might be saved. 2) We must carefully examine and test all things that we read and hear as to whether they are true. 3) We must show our love for one another by living our lives in the truth.

I John 3:17 My little children, let us not love in word or in tongue, but in deed and in truth.

Each of John's epistles have its distinct emphasis. In I John, the apostle discusses fellowship with God; in II John, he forbids fellowship with false teachers; and in III John, he encourages fellowship with Christian brethren.

III John is the shortest book in the Bible, and it is very personal and vivid. John supplemented his statements on Christian hospitality in II John with this late 1st century letter to Gaius, a member of one of his churches. It offers a stark contrast between two men who responded in opposite ways to the traveling teachers who have been sent out by the apostle John.

The faithful Gaius responds with generosity and hospitality, but the faithless Diotrephes responds with arrogance and opposition. Consequently, John writes this letter to commend Gaius for walking in the truth and to condemn Diotrephes for walking in error.

John praised Gaius for applying and living out the teachings of the apostles, but condemned Diotrephes, a selfish church leader, who not only refused to help these traveling, godly teachers but also had slandered John and opposed Gaius and anyone else who disagreed with him. He was a real problem in the church. This book demonstrates that pettiness can divide Christians if they are not living by God's Word.

Now to avoid the dual dangers of false teaching and division within the church, John encourages members of God's church to the dual challenge of love and discernment in truth. Following his expression of love for Gaius, John assures him of his prayers for his health and voices his joy over Gaius's persistent walk in the truth and for the manner in which he shows hospitality and support for traveling ministers who have come to his area.

The phrase in verse 6: "send them forth on their journey," means to provide help for God's traveling minister's endeavors. Included in this help can be food, money, arrangements for companions, and means of travel.

By supporting these men who are ministering for Christ, Gaius has become a fellow worker of the truth even though he is in a specific congregation and unable to travel and preach. So this makes the connection between every member of God's church and the ministry all doing the work together and how important it is.

Today, most of this aid to God's ministers is provided for by the tithes and offerings of the brethren, but not everyone in the church feels the same way as the faithful Gaius. Diotrephes' heart is 180 degrees removed from Gaius' heart and he is no longer living in

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love. Pride has taken precedence in his life. He has refused a letter John has written for the church, fearing that his authority might be superseded by that of the apostle John. He also has accused John of evil words and refused to accept traveling ministers.

Diotrephes forbids others to do so and even expels them from the church if they disobey him. John uses this negative example as an opportunity to encourage Gaius to continue his hospitality and by extension to encourage every one of God's people throughout the ages to do the same

III John was prompted by the report of some of these traveling ministers and teachers, which were called brethren in this letter, who returned to John and informed him of the hospitality of Gaius and the in-hospitality of Diotrephes. Here in verse 1, he writes:

III John 1 The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth:

Now nothing is known of the Gaius to whom III John is written except what the letter itself tells us, which is apparently all we need to know. Gaius was a common name in the Roman Empire. There were three other men by that name mentioned in the New Testament.

There was Gaius of Macedonia, one of Paul's traveling companions, who together with Aristarchus was seized by the rioting mob at Ephesus. (Acts 19:29) Then, there was Gaius of Derbe who accompanied Paul on his last trip to Jerusalem and who formed part of the group of delegates that presented the offering from the gentile churches to the church in Judea. (Acts 20:4) This Gaius presumably presented the Derbe church and possibly the other churches of Galatia with these Gentile gifts. Finally, there was the Gaius of Corinth in whose house Paul lived while dictating the letter to the Romans. (Romans 16:23)

Gaius was a common name, and there is no reason to identify any of these persons with the Gaius of III John. According to III John, this Gaius was simply a faithful and spiritual Christian leader in a local church in Asia over which the apostle John had oversight.

But troubles had come into this church and, in spite of a letter sent by John to the chief offender, Diotrephes, the problems had grown worse. This arrogant Diotrephes had seized the reins of one of the Asia Minor churches and promoted himself as its preeminent authority, trying to cast John out of the authority that he had. So, having maligned John's authority and rejected the teachers sent out by John, expelling those in

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his congregation who wanted to receive them, Diotrephes had to be dealt with.

He had assumed an unwarranted and pernicious authority in the church, so much so that by the time of the writing of this letter, John's own authority had been challenged and those who had been sympathetic to John had been excommunicated from the local assembly. In addition, due to this struggle, traveling ministers had been rudely treated, including probably an official delegation from John. Gaius had received such persons and is commended for it. Diotrephes had not and is rebuked.

Now Diotrephes is also promised further chastisement when the apostle John comes to him, which he hopes to do shortly. In verse 9, John alludes to a previous letter that Diotrephes has spurned. This may have been I or II John, but it is likely a letter that has been lost or perhaps destroyed by Diotrephes. Toward the end of III John, a third personality is mentioned, Demetrius, whom John holds up as an example of one who does good and is therefore clearly of God.

The messages to, or about these three personalities give a straightforward outline of the book of III John. 1) The message to Gaius, who is termed a fellow worker; 2) is the message about Diotrephes, who is causing the problem; and 3) the message about Demetrius, who is designated an example to all.

The basic theme of this letter is to enjoy and continue to have fellowship, or hospitality, with the brethren in truth, especially full-time Christian workers. This is contrasted between the truth and servant-hood of Gaius and the error and selfishness of Diotrephes.

Now moving through III John, five specific purposes can be discerned from its contents:

1. To commend Gaius for his adherence to the truth and his hospitality to the traveling ministers and teachers sent out by John. We can find that in verses 1-6.
2. To encourage Gaius to continue his support of these brethren, found in verse 6- 8.
- 3.) To rebuke Diotrephes for his pride and misconduct. We find that in verses 9-11.
- 4) To provide a recommendation for Demetrius, found in verse 12.
- 5) To inform Gaius of John's intention to visit and straighten out the difficulties, and we find that in verses 10, 13, and 14.

Now let us take a look at some details in John's letter. In the first part of III John, the elder writes to one and all, of his beloved children whose godly behavior has given the apostle John great joy. The brethren, upon returning to John, have informed him of Gaius's faithfulness, love, and generosity in their behalf.

III John 1-4 The Elder, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth: Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you, just as you walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth.

I find it interesting that truth is mentioned four times in four verses here, so obviously it is a very important focus that John is making here. John's opening words to Gaius are merely a conventional greeting. They give the author's name and the name of the recipient of the letter, and they contain a wish for the recipient's good health and prosperity.

This last part of the greeting was so common that in Latin letters of the period an abbreviation was often used to convey it. Signed at the end of a Roman letter was *SVBEEV*. In Latin it means, "*Si vales, bene est; ego valeo.*" Translated to English it means: "If you are well, it is good; I am well."

So John used that traditional greeting. However as in II John, these conventional forms are altered in significant ways in order to give distinctly Christian greetings. Most strikingly is the word truth, because this is both unexpected and prominent.

As in II John, the author combines it with love. Also the way in which John wishes Gaius good health is striking because it is adding, in effect, that he is not wishing him health of soul—*psuche*, literally translated as breath—for the simple reason that he knows from reports of Gaius' actions that his life is already prospering spiritually because of his fine example and all that he is doing.

Now two characteristics of Gaius stand out: his truth and his love. John deals with each in turn. Gaius obviously had heard the truth of the gospel and had received it wholeheartedly with the result that the truth was now in him and was causing him to vigorously pursue that way of life which the truth indicated. Also, this was not some hidden or secret thing.

On the contrary, Gaius lived the truth in such an open way that he was observed by

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others who in turn reported the uprightness of his conduct and character to John. That is how John could include this example or praise to Gaius in his letter. Gaius was a “light” in this world, as Jesus had instructed His disciples to be. He had fulfilled the Christ’s command in Matthew 5 which says:

Matthew 5:16 Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.

So Christians are not to be recluses or hermits. We are to live our lives out in the open. Quoting Rabbi Lapin, we are to live “in the bone of the day”; out in the open; boldly.

Today many regard truth as nonessential, as long as good deeds are done. But John does not agree with this view, nor does he regard it as possible. According to the apostle John, good deeds flow from truth, just as love flows from truth. For it is only as one walks according to the doctrines of the Word, which he has been taught, that truly righteous acts become possible.

In this John preserves the same type of connection between truth and righteousness as he has already shown to exist between truth and love in his previous letter. You see, love is not manipulative because that would be deceitful, that would not be truthful. True love is truthful; based on truth and it comes from a truthful person. It is absolutely necessary.

In addition, it is as his children in the faith exhibit such conduct that John himself experiences the greatest joy. John’s joy is that of a father who exults in the upright and productive life of a child who has been reared well. Any of us parents can appreciate this.

John says, there is no greater joy than this. This emphasis on joy is quite impressive, occurring as it does in a letter that reveals so much else to cause sorrow, dealing with the problem in that congregation.

Now Gaius is not only noteworthy for his truth and uprightness of conduct, he is also characterized by love, which he has demonstrated by his hospitality to traveling Christian teachers, particularly strangers. III John 5 we read:

III John 5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers.

Now in reference to this service, John does two things: First, he commends Gaius for the service he has already rendered; and second, he encourages him to continue such service in the days ahead. In connection with the last point, John gives several reasons why such service is both right and necessary.

It is interesting that in commending Gaius for past acts of hospitality, John commends him not for some special feeling of benevolence toward strangers but rather for a work faithfully done. The reason for this is that hospitality was a frequently repeated command of the apostles based on the more general teaching on the same subject by Jesus Christ, here in Matthew 25.

Matthew 25:34-36 Then the King will say to those on His right hand, 'Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world: for I was hungry and you gave Me food; I was thirsty and you gave Me drink; I was a stranger and you took Me in; I was naked and you clothed Me; I was sick and you visited Me; I was in prison and you came to Me.'

There we see what Christ was referring to, having been taken care of by His church. We are to also take care of the brethren and others in need while we are here on earth. Many times Paul had written of the need to show hospitality. To both Timothy and Titus he had declared that a bishop must be hospitable. He wrote that a widow was to be honored if, among other things, she would practice hospitality. Peter said that we are to offer hospitality to one another without grumbling. The author of Hebrews, probably Paul, declared,

Hebrews 13:2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.

These commands were apparently known to Gaius, and he was careful to fulfill them. Consequently, he is said to have been faithful in the performance of this important duty. But would this service continue? John gives no indication of really doubting it. Still, as the next verses reveal, Diotrephes was apparently applying great pressure to stop such acts of charity, and a word of encouragement was appropriate. So John continues,

III John 6-8 [speaking to Gaius here] who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, because they went forth for His name's sake,

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taking nothing from the Gentiles [speaking of the traveling teachers and ministers]. We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth.

There in his letter, John emphasizes that we are all in this together and that we become fellow workers in the truth by supporting one another, especially the ministry.

Now, unlike I and II John, III John makes no mention of the name Jesus Christ, but verse 7 says, “they went forth for His name's sake.” This is an indirect reference to Jesus Christ. In Acts 5:41, the identical Greek construction is used to refer back to the name of Jesus referred to in verse 40. Christ is the source and incarnation of truth, as is obvious from John's other writings.

Now these verses give three reasons why the support of traveling ministers is necessary. First, these are not mere visitors or even mere Christian visitors, they are God's servants. They went out for His name's sake. They work together for the truth. These are Christian ministers and should be welcomed for the sake of the one they serve.

Matthew 10:40 “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me.

Secondly, these ministers of God had determined to accept nothing from the world and, therefore, the burden for support by Christians was even greater.

In the Greek text this contrast is quite sharp, because the word “Gentiles” in the KJV; NKJV, and ESV, or the term “pagans” in the NIV and NET, which ends verse 7, is followed immediately by the word “we” in verse 8. The world, represented here by the terms pagans or Gentiles depending on the translation, will not support true Christian work, nor should they. We, however, who are Christians, must do it.

An interesting side note here is that, when a church or charitable organization takes a grant from the government, the government has a say; a secular legal right; it has authority and power over that organization. It can dictate what that church or organization is allowed to do or say. This is already being pushed forth by our government here in the U. S. against churches.

Third, John argues that we should continue support because in doing so, brethren work

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together with God's ministry. This command is directly opposite of the warning against supporting false teachers mentioned in II John 10-11.

Now here is an encouragement for those who would like to be involved in the front-line of God's work but who cannot be due to ill health, circumstances, or other pressing obligations. In God's sight those are fellow workers who support others by their love of the truth, encouragement, and prayers.

William Barclay writes: "A man's circumstances may be such that he cannot become a missionary or a preacher. Life may have put him in a position where he must get on with a secular job, and where he must stay in the one place, and carry out the routine duties of life and living. But where he cannot go his money and his prayers and his practical support can go; and, if he gives that support, he has made himself an ally of the truth. It is not everyone who can be, so to speak, in the front line; but every man by supporting those who are in the front line can make himself an ally of the truth." Even though he is a Protestant minister, he got the concept correct there.

Furthermore, all members of God's church must be allies, because all Christians should be fellow workers with all other Christians in the great task of disseminating the life-transforming truth of the Gospel of salvation through Christ and the coming Kingdom of God.

Here in III John 9-11, the epistle suddenly shifts to a negative note as John describes a man whose actions are diametrically opposite to those of Gaius. Diotrephes boldly rejects John's apostolic authority and refuses to receive traveling teachers sent out by John.

III John 9-11 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God [does not imitate; follow or apply God's Word].

Christians are frequently and rightly distressed at the seemingly enormous problems that seem to exist within the visible church. But there is some comfort in the fact that this has always been so, for 2000 years, even in the church of the apostolic period.

This section of III John is a case in point. John has written to Gaius, who, we are told, has been obedient to the truth, as taught by Jesus Christ and the apostles, and he has seen to the needs of visitors, and has shown love and, in turn, been loved by the brethren. But no sooner has John written of Gaius than the letter turns to a discussion of Diotrephes, who was apparently a contrast to Gaius at every point.

Gaius had walked in the truth, but Diotrephes would not acknowledge John's authority and taught people otherwise. Gaius saw to the needs of strangers; Diotrephes not only failed to see to their needs but had even forbidden others to do so. Gaius loved and served the brethren; Diotrephes was attempting to lord it over them. So the contrasting character of these two men was very obvious: Gaius served the brethren; Diotrephes served himself.

In referring to Diotrephes, John lists four areas in which the conduct of this man was out of line. First, in verse 9, John says, in other words, that Diotrephes will have nothing to do with us. This is a general statement, of course, and may be applied broadly, but it is also likely that it has a specific reference to the letter that John says he sent to the church earlier.

Some have imagined that this was I or II John, but there is no real reason to think so. In fact, it is actually unlikely, because neither gives the kind of instruction that Diotrephes is likely to have rejected. Apparently this referenced letter dealt with local problems, perhaps the reception of traveling teachers with which III John also deals. But Diotrephes had rejected the counsel, refused to receive the messengers who carried it, and may even have destroyed the letter.

This rejection of the apostolic authority was wrong and unwarranted, but it is not rare. It is only an early example of the same rejection seen in those who today prefer the opinions of the latest popular theologian or religious writer to the binding authority of the inerrant Word of God.

Second, in verse 10, John says, in other words, that Diotrephes was gossiping maliciously. That is, he was not content with a rejection of John's authority. He went on to justify his rebellion by explaining falsely why the counsels of John should not be followed.

In verse 10, the Greek verb that is translated "prating" in the KJV; NKJV, and ESV, and translated as "gossiping" in the NIV, comes from a root that was used of the action of water, such as when it boils up and throws off bubbles. Since bubbles are empty and useless, the verb eventually came to mean indulgence in empty or useless talk; a

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babbler or trifler, meaning by implication, to berate idly or mischievously.

This was the nature of Diotrephes' slander, though, of course, the words were no less evil in that they were groundless. People who do not live by truth will have a negative influence and corrupt those who do live by truth, if one's guard is not up.

I Corinthians 15:33-34 Do not be deceived: "Evil company corrupts good habits." Awake to righteousness, and do not sin; for some do not have the knowledge of God. I speak this to your shame. [Meaning that many people have been deceived.]

Now third, Diotrephes is said to have specifically defied John in regard to the duty of receiving traveling ministers. In III John 10, John says that, he himself does not receive the brethren. This was unmerciful, the kind of action one might expect from one who loves to be first, but in addition to this, it was also a direct rejection of the unanimous instruction of the apostles and Jesus Christ.

Fourth, Diotrephes is said to have insisted that others in the church follow his lead rather than that of the apostle John, and also to have exercised an unwarranted discipline over those who disobeyed him. As John tells us in III John 10, Diotrephes put them out of the church.

Diotrephes excommunicated loyal members of God's church because they failed to side with him in his rejection of John's authority, this was also rejection of apostolic authority given by Christ. There was a struggle for power over the affairs of the local church, and to this day we see nothing but struggles in the greater churches of God.

John attributes this, not to a difference of opinion about who should have the final word, but to obvious sin. John argues that the struggle came about because Diotrephes loves to be first. He loved to have preeminence over the brethren, desiring to be a sheriff rather than a shepherd over the brethren. The apostle Paul points this out to the Ephesians elders in Acts 20, where he says:

Acts 20:28 Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

So Christ owns the church and His ministers shepherd it, not to "sheriff" it. Diotrephes

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committed the original and greatest of all sins in one sense. It is the prideful, rebellious sin of Satan, who was unwilling to be what God had created him to be and who desired rather to be like the Most High. It is the opposite of the nature of the humble, obedient Christ we see described here in Philippians 2.

Philippians 2:6-9 Who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God [speaking of Jesus Christ, of course], but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.

For Satan's attempt to exalt himself; he will be made low. For Christ's humility and obedience; God exalted Him. Christ is our example; Satan is the world's example. The contrast must be obvious. Does your way of life look different from the world's? If not, you should rethink your life.

One might think that because of the abominable conduct of Diotrephes John might well have threatened him with excommunication, since he had excommunicated others, but significantly John does not say this. He says, in other words, only that when he comes he will call attention to what he is doing, that is, he will expose Diotrephes.

No doubt, John has in mind to exercise some form of corrective discipline if it becomes necessary, but John does not threaten, nor does he indicate that a severe penalty, such as excommunication, would be desirable. It may be that in this attitude he most shows his truly legitimate authority and reveals the character of Christ, who desires, not that sinners be condemned, but that they come to repentance.

On the other hand, Diotrephes should take no comfort from John's restrained tone, because the time is coming when he will be faced with his arrogance and evil works, and will have to give an account of them. So will all of Christ's servants when Christ Himself, and not merely his apostle, returns.

Paul wrote to the church in Rome saying, "So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God." We are therefore to build our life according to God's pattern so that we will stand approved in that day. Paul wrote in I Corinthians 3,

I Corinthians 3:13-15 Each one's work will become clear; for the Day will

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declare it, because it will be revealed by fire; and the fire will test each one's work, of what sort it is. If anyone's work which he has built on it endures, he will receive a reward. If anyone's work is burned, he will suffer loss; but he himself will be saved, yet so as through fire.

God offers to the faithful, salvation; and, for the faithful service of the saved, rewards. Salvation is a free gift, while rewards are earned by truthful, loving works.

Although those who have followed and imitated Jesus Christ are already justified by faith and will not face condemnation on the final day, God will still judge our works and reward us accordingly. The key verse in III John is verse 11

III John 11-12 Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.

So here we see the key verse, verse 11, stated and then immediately following that is an example of who is living that type of life. In the context of the letter, the evil example is most obviously Diotrephes and the good example is Demetrius.

III John may have been delivered by Demetrius. We do not know that for sure, but it seems logical to make that assumption. He has a good testimony and may even be one of those turned away by Diotrephes. He is widely known for his good character and his loyalty to the truth. Here he is highly commended by John and stands as a positive example for Gaius.

Consequently, the exhortation leads directly into what follows. The personal nature of the truism is conveyed by the word imitate. The Greek word for "imitate" is *mimeomai*, (*mim-eh'-om-ahee*) meaning mimic, which is always translated as "follow" in the KJV and NKJV. "Imitate" or "follow" occurs four times in the New Testament; and it is closely related to the word *mimetes* (*mim-ay-tace'*) meaning "follower" or "imitator," which occurs seven times. For example we find this word used in II Thessalonians 3:7-9.

II Thessalonians 3:7-9 For you yourselves know how you ought to follow [same word there: imitate or mimic] us, for we were not disorderly among you; nor did we eat anyone's bread free of charge, but worked with labor and toil night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, not because

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we do not have authority, but to make ourselves an example of how you should follow [imitate or mimic] us.

So it is referred to there in following the example of the apostles. In Ephesians 5:1, Christians are encouraged to be imitators of God. On another occasion, in I Peter 3:13, we are encouraged to be imitators of that which is good. But apart from these two instances, the examples in each case are human. Paul speaks three times of the need of Christians to imitate “us,” that is, the apostles.

I Corinthians 4:15-16 For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

Twice Paul says “me,” once here in I Corinthians 4:16 and also, in I Corinthians 11:1. In I Thessalonians 2:14 he speaks of being imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus. And then the author of Hebrews speaks twice of imitating those whose lives are characterized by the faith, meaning the brethren of the church.

Hebrews 6:11-12 And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end, that you do not become sluggish, but imitate [mimic; follow] those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

So consider the fruit of a person’s life as you follow them. The tests convey a great lesson, because this suggests that men and women will always imitate other men and women, and that may be all right sometimes however, members of God’s church must be careful who it is they imitate.

Even in Christian circles there are bad examples, like Diotrophes; and there are good examples, like Demetrius. So basically what John seems to be saying here is choose your example carefully. Because in attempting to imitate the good, we indicate that we are of God, just as by imitating the bad indicates that they are not God’s children.

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John is not calling Gaius to imitate himself, however. There is an example closer at hand: Demetrius.

We do not know anything about this Demetrius except what we are told in III John 12. He may have been the bearer of John's letter or another member of the local church. All we know is that Gaius was acquainted with him and that he was highly commended by everyone, by the truth itself, and by the apostle John.

Demetrius apparently did not have had the prestige and authority of Diotrephes, but Demetrius is important nonetheless, because he is the one who should be imitated, rather than Diotrephes.

So it is that the first are made last and the last first, as Matthew 19:30 tells us. Accordingly are the humble exalted and the mighty ones made low. Consequently notice who God has chosen.

I Corinthians 1:27-29 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty; and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are, that no flesh should glory in His presence.

So, God has chosen the type of people who are teachable. They are not the wealthiest, strongest, or the most intelligent in the world.

The conclusion to III John is similar to the verses that end II John, except that John attaches a far more personal farewell greeting.

III John 13-14 I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.

John comes to the end in love. "Peace to you" spoken by the aged elder, no doubt brought a calm to the troubled church to which he wrote. The farewell greeting "Peace to you" in verse 14 was adopted by Christians from Hebrew usage, though it was infused with new meaning by Jesus following His resurrection.

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John 20:19-22 Then, the same day at evening, being the first day of the week, when the doors were shut where the disciples were assembled, for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood in the midst, and said to them, "Peace be with you." When He had said this, He showed them His hands and His side. Then the disciples were glad when they saw the Lord. So Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you." And when He had said this, He breathed on them, and said to them, "Receive the Holy Spirit.

John 20:26 And after eight days His disciples were again inside, and Thomas with them. Jesus came, the doors being shut, and stood in the midst, and said, "Peace to you!"

Now this is strikingly appropriate at the close of John's letter dealing with so much friction and bitterness in the congregation. Contention causes disunity in the church, but in the midst of it there can always be, in the humble and contrite heart, that peace of Jesus Christ that passes all human understanding.