

# **3JOHN**

## **The Third Letter of John**

## Introduction

Like the author of 2John, the author of this letter introduces himself simply as ‘the elder’. There are no reasons to doubt the tradition that we are dealing with the same person. We refer the reader to the Introduction to 2John for a comment on the relationship between the elder and the author of the Gospel of John and the First Letter of John.

This is a very different kind of letter from 2John. It is a personal letter to a man called Gaius, recommending a missionary named Demetrius and complaining about a certain Diotrephes, a leader of a church in Gaius’s area. In spite of the fact that the elder has personally recommended certain missionaries, Diotrephes is refusing to offer them hospitality.

We are not told why Diotrephes has acted in this way. Perhaps the elder himself does not know. Though the matter of breakaway teachers is not raised, it may have a bearing on the situation. The breakdown of the communion of Christians in the area may have caused Diotrephes to suspect all itinerant preachers. Whatever the reasons, the elder is concerned that the refusal of hospitality is another cause of the breakdown of love in the community. It also leaves the church in which Diotrephes and Gaius have a leadership role vulnerable to schism, without close contact with the ‘mother’ church. The elder is pleased that Gaius is not following the example of Diotrephes, and that missionaries in good standing and recommended by the elder are being offered hospitality in his home, and so in the church which meets there.

The text is preserved in its entirety in the fourth century parchment codexes, Vaticanus and Sinaiticus, and in the fifth century parchment codex Alexandrinus.

3John appears only once in the official church lectionary, when verses 5-8 are read on Saturday of Week 32 of Ordinary Time, Year II.

The style is of a standard letter of the day. Like 2John it is the length of a papyrus sheet. Unlike 2John it is a personal letter rather than a letter to the community. We met the expression 'whom I love in the truth' also in 2John 1. Here in 3John, too, 'truth' is a central theme, the word occurring seven times in this brief letter. He loves Gaius 'in the truth', because the love he has for him flows from their shared communion in the only true love which is the love of God. In wishing Gaius well, the elder emphasises his health of 'soul' (Greek: *psuchē*), trusting that the love which they share is experienced as a profound health of mind and heart.

He is overjoyed that Gaius is living his faith in such a faithful way, and especially commends him for the hospitality which he is so graciously giving to Christian missionaries that have gone out from the elder's church. They have reported to the elder full of praise for the welcome given them by Gaius and by the church which meets in his home. The elder trusts that they will be offered whatever they need to take the next step in their missionary journey.

The elder reassures Gaius that the missionaries are in good standing in the community, and that they are genuinely working because of their commitment to Christ. They are teaching in his 'name'. Such itinerant preachers need support, and by offering it Gaius is sharing in their mission.

**<sup>1</sup>The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.**

**<sup>2</sup>Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul.**

**<sup>3</sup>I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth.**

**<sup>4</sup>I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.**

**<sup>5</sup>Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you;**

**<sup>6</sup>they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God;**

**<sup>7</sup>for they began their journey for the sake of the Name [NRSV 'Christ'], accepting no support from non-believers.**

**<sup>8</sup>Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.**

**<sup>9</sup>I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.**

**<sup>10</sup>So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with those charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church.**

**<sup>11</sup>Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God.**

**<sup>12</sup>Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true.**

**<sup>13</sup>I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink;**

**<sup>14</sup>instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face.**

**<sup>15</sup>Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.**

As suggested in the Introduction, it is not clear exactly what the problem was between the elder and Diotrephes. In a time of breakdown in the unity of the Christians in the area, there is clearly a lack of mutual trust between them. For whatever reason Diotrephes is suspicious of itinerant preachers and is taking a hard line, expelling from the church anyone who welcomes them. This is in contrast with the behaviour of Gaius; hence this letter.

Demetrius is one of these missionaries and the elder is recommending him to Gaius. It is possible that Demetrius was the carrier of the letter and that it was intended as a letter of recommendation.