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The Case Study of Gaius and Diotrephes

3 John

In the case study from 2 John, the apostle explored how tightly truth and love fit together. While we might have thought John had been contrasting two polar opposites throughout 1 John when he spoke about truth and love—one an immovable object and the other an unstoppable force—we learned in 2 John that each virtue guides and shapes the character of the other. You cannot have genuine truth without love, and you cannot have pure love without truth. The book of 2 John is about demonstrating unity between two critical values in our discipleship.

John's third letter, on the other hand, is a case study that was written not to teach us how seek unity but to show us how to deal with controversy. In 3 John, we see the stark contrast between two men who love different people. Gaius, the man to whom John writes this letter, loves Jesus more than anything else. He gives generous support to missionaries to help them along as they proclaim the name of Jesus to the Gentiles who haven't yet heard about him (3 John 1:5–8), and he gives generously to them despite the fact that he is not a materially prosperous man (3 John 1:2). Diotrephes, on the other hand, loves *himself* more than anything else, so that

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the Apostle John describes him as a “lover of putting himself first” (3 John 1:9).

In 3 John, the apostle gives us glimpses into the end result of two kinds of discipleship: in Gaius, we see the fruit of following Jesus, and in Diotrephes, we see the fruit of following after our own sinful, selfish desires. Everyone is someone’s disciple, so we all face only one question: what kind of a master will we serve?

No Greater Joy

In 3 John, “the elder” John writes another letter of roughly the same length as 2 John. (Both letters could have been written on a single sheet of papyrus.)¹ In this letter we meet Gaius, a man whom the Apostle John holds in the highest esteem. John writes this in his introduction:

¹The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.

²Beloved, concerning all things I pray *for* you to be prospered and to be in *good* health, just as your soul prospers. ³For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and bore witness to your truth, just as you are walking in truth. ⁴I have no greater joy than to hear *that* my little children *are* walking in truth. (3 John 1:1–4)

Elsewhere in the New Testament, there are at least two men named Gaius who are both connected with the Apostle Paul, including a Gaius of Derbe (Acts 20:4), who is probably the same Gaius as in Acts 19:29. Then, there is the Gaius whom Paul baptized in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:14). Since many scholars believe Paul’s letter to the Romans was written from Corinth, the Gaius whom Paul names as his host at the end of the letter in Romans 16:23 is probably the same man mentioned in 1 Corinthians. We do not know, however, whether any of these men is the same Gaius whom John addresses here in 3 John.²

What John does make clear in these opening verses, however, is that Gaius loves Jesus with everything he has, which

thrills John. John illustrates his deep admiration for Gaius's spiritual maturity in three ways. First, John addresses Gaius as a man whom he “loves in truth,” which is an identical phrase to what John wrote in 2 John 1:1 to describe his relationship to the elect lady and her children. This phrase describes mutual admiration and affection on the basis of a common love of the truth—a fellowship based on their shared love for the truth of Jesus.

Second, John offers a prayer of blessing for Gaius's prosperity and health. This isn't the kind of health-and-wealth prayer we tend to hear from proponents of the so-called prosperity gospel, as though John were claiming money and good health for Gaius here through “faith.” In fact, the emphasis of John's prayer is not on the blessings but on Gaius's maturity. Donald Burdick makes this observation:

The contrast between Gaius's physical and material condition, on the one hand, and his spiritual condition, on the other, was rather striking. His spiritual prosperity seems to have exceeded his material prosperity. Too often in that day, as well as this, just the reverse was true.³

The apostle is not offering a polite wish for prosperity and good health, and he isn't suggesting that God is obligated to reward Gaius for his godliness with money and health. Instead, John is simply praying that God would bless Gaius, a man who loves God, by matching his spiritual vitality with material prosperity and physical health.

If you think about it, that's quite a daunting prayer. Would you pray that God would adjust your physical health and your wealth to match the level of your spiritual strength?

Third, John exclaims his great joy in verse 3 upon hearing that Gaius is “walking in truth”—again, a very similar phrase to what John had written in his second letter (2 John 1:4). Apparently, John had sent to this church some of his own missionaries (“the brothers,” 3 John 1:3), who reported back to John that Gaius was “walking in truth.” This phrase extends

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the idea of truth beyond memorizing a set of facts, suggesting that the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ had permeated every aspect of Gaius's life. The full range of his daily life in his home, work, recreation, and so on was characterized and shaped by the truth of the gospel.

We shouldn't miss the fact that John describes Gaius as one of "my little children" (3 John 1:4). Their relationship is not a mere acquaintance, but the language instead suggests that John had personally shepherded Gaius at some point as an elder, perhaps leading him originally to a saving knowledge of Jesus, or at least taking some kind of direct spiritual responsibility for him at some point along the way. John's joy overflows in this passage out of deep satisfaction for seeing his ministry bear such great fruit in the life of Gaius.

This is why John writes in verse 4 that he has "no greater joy than to hear that my little children are walking in truth." John genuinely finds his greatest joy in seeing Jesus Christ glorified. He loves to see sinners repent from their sins, because their repentance honors Jesus. He labors to see people embrace the truth of the gospel for salvation, because their faith glorifies Jesus. He pours out his whole life in ministry toward seeing believers begin to live differently, because as they walk in newness of life, they exalt Jesus as worthy of all glory, honor, and praise. In Gaius, then, John rejoices because he sees his own life's work and ministry bearing much fruit.

MISSIONS FOR THE SAKE OF THE NAME

We cannot understand John's love for Gaius unless we understand what John taught us in 2 John: love for our fellow believers is inseparably connected to the truth of Jesus Christ. Finally, in 3 John 1:5–8, John discusses in detail what Gaius had done specifically to earn the apostle's unrestrained praise, namely, he had shown hospitality to missionaries whom John had sent to Gaius's city:

⁵Beloved, you do a faithful *thing*, whatever you do to these brothers and strangers, ⁶who testified to your love before the church, *for* whom you will do well sending *them* on their journey in a manner worthy of God. ⁷For the sake of the name they went out, receiving nothing from the Gentiles. ⁸Therefore we ought to receive *with hospitality* such as these, that we may become fellow-workers for the truth. (3 John 1:5–8)

As in 2 John, the backdrop of 3 John is the movement of Christian missionaries from city to city, preaching and teaching the gospel of Jesus, planting and strengthening churches wherever they went. Because this was not a time when restaurants were readily available or when clean and safe lodging was easy to find, missionaries depended on the support of other Christians who lived in the cities where they were ministering for a place to stay and to provide food as they traveled.

This is what Gaius had been doing. Though these missionaries were strangers, Gaius had done a “faithful thing” for them, doing whatever he could to support them and then “sending them on their journey” when they moved on by providing them with enough food and money to get to the next town and the next church. Because of Gaius’s generosity, the missionaries were able to avoid asking for support from the Gentiles—that is, from unbelievers—which was important so that they would not be perceived as “peddlers of God’s word,” in the words of Paul (2 Corinthians 2:17). John says that in doing this, Gaius had become one of the missionaries’ “fellow-workers for the truth.”

So, in verse 6, John writes that Gaius has done well to send these missionaries on their journey “in a manner worthy of God.” In other words, whatever Gaius had done for these missionaries, he had actually done to serve the one who ultimately was responsible for sending the missionaries: God. The principle is this: whenever we serve the people of God, we should do so as though we were serving God himself.

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And in fact, that is exactly what we are doing. Whatever we do to the people of God—whether for good or for evil—we do to God himself. Jesus taught this idea when he told us he will say to the righteous at the final judgment, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40), and to the wicked, “Truly, I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:45). Also, when Jesus stopped Saul in his tracks from persecuting Christians in Damascus, the Lord said, “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (Acts 9:4).

This perspective helps us avoid slipping into a joyless, duty-bound sense of obligation when we support missionaries. John doesn’t want to shame us into reluctantly sending some ministry a check out of nothing more than guilt. Instead, he wants to draw us into the larger vision of being involved in the mission of God in this world. Gaius was not someone in the bleachers, watching the game from a distance. Instead, by his involvement, he was an active member of the team staff on the sidelines. He may not have taken the field himself for this part of the game, but he personally invested in and worked for the entire team’s success.

Guilt should never be the motivation driving us to do missions or to support missionaries. Instead, John reminds us of the true reason for missions: we do missions “for the sake of the name.” As we talked about in chapter 10, when biblical writers speak of God’s name, they are referring to his character, his reputation, and his deeds. To go out “for the sake of the name,” then, means that we are working to spread the fame and renown and glory of Jesus to all those who have not yet heard. The reason for missions is the glory and honor of Jesus Christ.

John Piper puts this so well in his book *Let the Nations Be Glad*:

Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is

ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity, but worship abides forever....

But worship is also the fuel of missions. Passion for God in worship precedes the offer of God in preaching. You can't commend what you don't cherish. Missionaries will never call out, "Let the nations be glad!" who cannot say from the heart, "I rejoice in the Lord.... I will be glad and exult in you, I will sing praise to your name, O Most High" (Ps. 104:34; 9:2). Mission begins and ends in worship.⁴

This is the first challenge that 3 John presents to us. Do we love Jesus with everything we have, as John and Gaius did? Do we live to see all people come to love and worship and adore our Lord Jesus Christ?

If not, we do not need more shame heaped on us for our lack of commitment. Instead, we perhaps need more worship. The more we learn to love the worthiness of the name of Jesus, the more we will delight in being sent and sending others for the sake of his name.

DO NOT IMITATE THAT WHICH IS EVIL

But while Gaius models for us the fruit of a disciple who loves Jesus more than anything else, John moves on in the second half of his letter to address the selfishness of a man who loves himself more than anything else:

⁹I wrote something to the church, but that lover of putting *himself* first among them—Diotrephes—does not receive us. ¹⁰For this reason, when I come, I will bring up his works that he is doing, falsely accusing us with wicked words. And not content with this, neither does he receive the brothers, and he forbids those who desire to, and he casts them out of the church.

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¹¹Beloved, do not imitate that which is evil, but that which is good. The one who does good is from God, but the one who does evil has not seen God. ¹²Demetrius has received testimony from all and from the truth itself. And we also bear testimony, and you know that our testimony is true. (3 John 1:9–12)

There is some debate about what John is referring to in verse 9 when he says, “I wrote something to the church...” It is possible, as R. C. H. Lenski suggests, that the “something” John wrote was the letter we know as 2 John, so that “the two letters were probably written on the same day and were sent to the same place, the second to the congregation, the third to one of the members.”⁵ If so, then the subject matter of 2 John suggests that Diotrephes was not only turning away John’s missionaries but might also have been receiving false teachers, deceivers, and antichrists into the midst of the church (2 John 1:7–11).

Most commentators, however, think this must have been a letter of introduction to Gaius’s church, asking them to receive John’s missionaries with hospitality.⁶ If this is the case, then that letter has been lost. Since 3 John does not address doctrinal errors, we have no reason to believe Diotrephes was involved in supporting false teachers. The only thing we know for sure from the limited information we have is that this is a man who wanted nothing more than to be first among everyone in the church.

So, we do not even know whether Diotrephes held any official standing in the church as a pastor, an elder, or a deacon. John simply tells us that Diotrephes was a “lover of putting himself first,” without clarifying whether Diotrephes was usurping power or simply misusing the power he had lawfully received, although many commentators feel the description of Diotrephes most likely fits a person who probably did not have official status in the church.⁷

In any case, what is abundantly clear is that Diotrephes possessed an incredible amount of informal power. Perhaps

Diotrephes (or his father) had been a substantial financial supporter of the church; perhaps he held significant social or political power in the community; or perhaps he simply had a forceful personality that no one wanted to oppose. Whatever the case, Diotrephes brazenly turned away missionaries sent by the Apostle John himself, and he even went so far as to slander John (one of the hand-picked disciples of the Lord Jesus!) and his missionaries to discredit them by “falsely accusing us with wicked words” (3 John 1:10).

Why? Because Diotrephes cared nothing for Jesus—he only wanted to accumulate power for himself. Because John was an apostle, he was therefore a threat to the power that Diotrephes had built up within this community. So, John writes that Diotrephes “does not receive us” (3 John 1:9), which suggests something more along the lines of “does not acknowledge our authority.”⁸ In order to amass every last shred of power for himself, Diotrephes had no choice but to reject the authority of John.

When people reject everyone else’s authority but their own, we should in many cases recognize their arrogance as a major red flag in their lives, a symptom revealing deeper sin problems. Time and time again, leaders who refuse accountability to anyone ultimately end up running off the rails in one way or another. Sometimes, their desire for complete freedom opens opportunities for sin that they are unable (or unwilling) to turn down. Other times, they refuse accountability because they already have something to hide. Either way, refusing to acknowledge the authority of others is not a sign of strong leadership but an early warning sign that can help alert us to the fact that we are dealing with someone who is a “lover of putting himself first.”

By contrast, John’s authority as an apostle is rooted not in pride or egotism but in his submission to the authority of Jesus Christ. Someone with genuine authority within the church recognizes himself first of all to be under someone else’s authority.

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Even Jesus considered himself to be a man under authority. When the Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant, Jesus offered to go with him to heal the servant, but the centurion refused, saying, “Lord, I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word, and my servant will be healed. *For I too am a man under authority, with soldiers under me*” (Matthew 8:8–9). Jesus marveled at the man’s faith for saying such a thing—for saying that he, like Jesus, was a man under authority.

How could the centurion say truthfully that the Son of God was a man under authority? Because Jesus’ authority was rooted in his submission to the Father. Paul writes this in his letter to the Philippians:

⁵Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, ⁶who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, ⁷but *emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant*, being born in the likeness of men. ⁸And being found in human form, he *humbled himself* by becoming *obedient to the point of death*, even death on a cross. ⁹Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, ¹⁰so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Philippians 2:5–11)

God the Father exalted Jesus and gave him the name that is above every name because Jesus had made himself nothing, taking the form of the servant, humbling himself by becoming obedient to the point of death. Jesus’ obedient submission to his Father was the grounds for his exaltation and his authority over everyone in heaven and on earth and under the earth.

So, John’s authority was built upon his submission to Jesus Christ, and Jesus’ authority was built upon his submission to the Father. The difference between John and Diotrophes is

that Diotrephes loved to put himself first, but John loved to put Christ first—just as Christ had put his Father first.

John therefore warns Gaius, “Beloved, do not imitate that which is evil, but that which is good” (3 John 1:11). The word for “imitate” is the word from which we get our word *mimeograph*; the mimeograph machine was the predecessor of the copy machine. As Christ submitted to his own Father, even to the point of dying on the cross, we should submit to Christ rather than insisting upon putting ourselves first. In our attitude, desires, and actions, we ought to be replicas (mimeographs) of the original example of humility, Jesus Christ himself. Demetrius is here commended as an exemplar of imitating the good, since he was probably the one who had carried John’s letter(s) to Gaius’s church.

This imitation is critical, John explains, because “the one who does good is from God, but the one who does evil has not seen God” (3 John 1:11). If we are the children of God, then like John, Gaius, and Demetrius, we will love to put Christ first. If instead we put ourselves first, then we prove we have no knowledge of God whatsoever—in fact, we prove we have never so much as seen him.

FACE-TO-FACE FELLOWSHIP

John closes with an echo from 2 John:

¹³I had many things to write, but I do not want to write to you through pen and ink. ¹⁴But I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face. ¹⁵Peace to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name. (3 John 1:13–15)

In 2 John 1:12, John had written something nearly identical, expressing a desire to speak face-to-face rather than writing with paper and ink. From these statements, we gain an important principle for ministry. There certainly isn’t anything wrong with making use of communication technology like paper, pen, ink, email, text messaging, or

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something similar, but we should never forget that some kinds of ministry should be conducted face-to-face, especially in the midst of severe conflict.

Consider this: in 2 John and 3 John, the apostle had written two God-breathed letters that would be included in the canon of the New Testament, but even he recognized that there were relational needs that would not have been met simply by sending these letters through paper, pen, and ink. If that is the case, then why should we think that even our most polished emails or witty text messages are sufficient to accomplish everything necessary for ministry in the body of Christ?

Messy, painful ministry—as well as encouraging, enriching ministry—can only happen to a limited degree without having direct, face-to-face contact. But if we love one another in truth, we will confront sin and exhort one another to press on for the sake of the name, and we will go to great lengths to do it face-to-face.

Beloved, walk in the truth for the sake of the name of Jesus. Do not imitate that which is evil, but that which is good. Peace to you.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

1. What brings you the greatest joy in life? Is it the name of Jesus, or something else? What preoccupies your thoughts? What kind of disappointment brings you the most pain?
2. What role have you taken up for the sake of the name?
3. How well do you submit to authority within the church? Who do you most want to put first: Jesus or yourself?
4. What ministry needs in your life right now require face-to-face conversations?

NOTES

contain a greeting at the beginning of the letter is Hebrews, but Hebrews does contain a few greetings at the very end of the letter, while 1 John does not include greetings from the author to specific recipients at any point.

2. Kruse, *Letters of John*, 205.
3. The first four of these deviations are found in Stott, *Epistles of John*, 203–5.
4. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 559–60.
5. Donald Burdick writes, “This double emphasis [on truth and love] sets the tone for the entire letter as John proceeds to show the careful balance in which these two elements of the Christian life must be held.” Burdick, *Letters of John*, 431. In this chapter, I draw heavily from Burdick’s extended section on the relationship between truth and love (pp. 431–33).
6. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 199.

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1. Stott, *Epistles of John*, 198, 213.
2. Kruse, *Letters of John*, 220.
3. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 460–61.
4. John Piper, *Let the Nations Be Glad! The Supremacy of God in Missions*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 17.
5. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 577.
6. E.g., Stott, *Epistles of John*, 224–25; Burdick, *Letters of John*, 444; Kruse, *Letters of John*, 226.
7. E.g., Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistles*, 588; Burdick, *Letters of John*, 463.
8. Burdick, *Letters of John*, 454.