

1 3 John. Hospitality: The Church as an Inclusive Community of Friends

Outline

Greetings to the beloved Gaius, vv. 1-2

Praise of Gaius for his hospitality, 3-8

Criticism of Diotrephes for his lack of hospitality, 9-11

Testimony in favor of Demetrius (carrier of the letter?), 12

Farewell: churches as communities of friends, 13-15

3 John is the shortest book of the New Testament (219 words; cf. 2 John, 245, Philemon, 355 and Jude, 457 words). The author refers to himself simply as “elder/presbyter” (1:1), not as an “apostle.” If not the Apostle John, he may have been a disciple who preserved and adapted the Beloved Disciple’s teachings for a future generation. 3 John probably was written around 95 AD, perhaps in Ephesus, by the same writer as 2 and 1 John (see “the elder” also in 2 John 1).

1. The way: (a) Love and (b) Truth. Despite its brevity, 3 John helpfully illuminates fundamental facets of love (vv. 1-2, 5-6, 11; cf. “friends,” v. 15) and of truth (vv. 1, 3-4, 8, 12; cf. “testimony,” vv. 3, 6, 12). In John’s three letters, love and truth maintain a dialectical relationship and constitute the two poles for their teaching (“theology”). A disciple’s life must move ahead like a train, always on these two tracks. In these letters, as in the Bible in general, truth is not so much to be “believed” as to be “done” (v. 8).

Truth is understood metaphorically as a way and the disciples are to always “walk” on this path

(vv. 3-4, literal translation). 3 John is directed to the leader of a church, Gaius, whom the author calls, literally, “beloved” (vv. 1-2, 5, 11) “whom I love in the truth” (v. 1). John also describes the exaggerated self-love of Diotrephes, “who loves to put himself first” (v. 9; see below).

2. For Poor Strangers: Hospitality. To walk in truth, as when we manifest love in acts of hospitality to homeless strangers, is to do good (v. 11; Matthew 25:31-46). Gaius, like John, is characterized by authentic love: instead of “xenophobia” (the fear and hatred of strangers and foreigners), Gaius is famous for his hospitality and love for strangers (v. 5). However, in this case they are not prosperous tourists but emissaries of Jesus, same-sex pairs, who followed his example of voluntary poverty (“taking nothing”) in order to share the Good News (vv. 6-8).

Hospitality is presented in the Bible as a fundamental manifestation of divine and brotherly love (Romans 12:13; 15:23-24; 16:1-2; 2 John 9-11; Hebrews 13:1-3). Often it was a matter of life or death because of the cultural context in the Ancient East (Judges 19). Instead of hospitality, travelers often suffered violence and sexual abuse. For such offenses God had to judge the men of Sodom and Gomorrah, who sought to rape God’s angel messengers (Genesis 19; cf. the Good Samaritan in Luke 18:29-37). Those who traveled in “the name” [of Jesus] (v.7) were impoverished persons who depended on the hospitality and solidarity of well-to-do persons like Gaius to meet their needs and enable them to fulfill their mission (v. 8).

3. Integral Salvation: Forgiveness, Healing, Liberation. Reflecting Jesus’ purpose in his ministry of healing the sick to manifest God’s inbreaking new order, the elder John prays for Gaius’ physical health and prosperity, which would facilitate his offer of hospitality (v. 2; cf. James 5:13-18). 1, 2 and 3 John also provide us images of healthy persons who “walk in the truth” (3 John 3-4, 2 John 4, 6; 1 John 1:7; 2:6) and who are physically healthy and thus able to work (3 John 5, 8). To be “blind”

and to “walk in darkness,” on the other hand, are metaphors that describe the ignorance of people who live in hate and do not love their brothers and sisters (1 John 2:1). John seeks to liberate and protect the church from Diotrephes’ tendency to oppress (concerning forgiveness, see 1 John 1:7--2:2).

4. House Churches as Communities of Friends. Usually the New Testament speaks of the church as a community of sisters and brothers (1 John 3:11-17; 2 John 1, 13; Matthew 23:8-12). This image emphasizes the household to which one belongs by birth, not by choice. In 3 John, however, the church (vv. 6, 9-10) is not a hierarchy of officials governing patriarchal families. The image of brothers and sisters (vv. 5, 10) is surpassed by that of the church as a community of “friends” (v. 15). Jesus himself chooses this image when he said: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father.” (John 15:15). In addition to the intimacy, Jesus underscored the depth of commitment toward his friends: “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13; cf. “brothers” in 1 John 3:16 (NIV) and “enemies” in Romans 5:6-11).

In the mid-seventeenth century in Great Britain, a religious movement under the leadership of George Fox (and later William Penn in America) called themselves simply “Friends,” but were soon named “Quakers” by their opponents. They were characterized by a rejection of traditional ecclesiastical ordained male hierarchies, the recognition of women as leaders, and opposition to oaths, military service and slavery. In 1963, six years before the Stonewall riots and more than a decade before the American Psychiatric Association reached similar conclusions (1973), British Quakers concluded that homosexuality is simply “sexual left-handedness” and began to openly welcome sexual minorities within their worship services.

5. Women and Feminist Theology of Friendship. Although only males are named in 3 John, women undoubtedly were among the “friends” who exchanged greetings (v. 15) and probably among the poor missionaries whom Gaius welcomed (vv. 5-8; see also “the elect lady and her children addressed” in 2 John). Although friendship is one of the most important themes in philosophy and literature (including the Bible), few theologians have written about it. Thanks to feminist theology, as expressed in works such as those of Carter Heyward, Mary Hunt, and Elizabeth Stuart, this situation is changing. Mary Hunt concludes that friendship, not the family, is society’s fundamental institution, and that heterosexual marriage at its best is only one example of friendship.¹ We cannot “define” words so rich and profound as “friends” and “friendship,” since it would be presumptuous to try to control their meaning and linguistic use. As in the case of “love,” each new experience reveals more unimagined facets and nuances. In addition, different historical and cultural contexts profoundly affect our experience of friendship: to have a friend-neighbor in a rural context in ancient times was very different from the friendship between professionals in a modern urban center. Nonetheless, we may indicate certain common dimensions of authentic friendship that the Bible emphasizes.

a. We like to think that we choose our friends, or, as in the experience of the rich (Proverbs, below), others choose us. Such freedom is a luxury not enjoyed in many small villages, where to be “neighbor” is to be “friend,” with the exception of enemies. Jesus warns us that in the community of his followers, the decision is not our concern since he has already chosen his friends (John 15:16). Furthermore, since Jesus is “a friend of tax collectors and ‘sinners’” (Matthew 11:19 // Luke 7:34 = Q), we may find it difficult to learn to accept and love all whom Jesus befriends.

b. We may prefer friends with whom we share interests, but Jesus pointed out that his friends share the common task of proclaiming the Good News and constructing new communities as the first fruits of the coming New Order (John 15:16). To be a Christian is not to remain isolated (Hebrews 10:25) but to form part of one of these communities that transcend patriarchal families (Mark 3:20-21, 31-35; John 19:25-27). However, because we are finite, limited, we are not able to have innumerable friends. Even Jesus avoided taking the entire multitude up to the Mount of Transfiguration (Mark 9:2) nor did he ask that the twelve keep watch with him, but chose only three (Mark 14:32-34).

c. The book of Proverbs contains many teachings about friendship. With an almost brutal realism, it notes that the rich have many friends while the poor lose the few they have (Proverbs 14:20; 19:4, 6-7). In accord with divine wisdom, a friend should be:

faithful (Proverbs 17:17; 18:24; 27:10)

true (16:28; 17:9; 27:6; 28:23; 29:5; see Galatians 4:16)

sensitive, courteous (25:17, 20; 26:18-19; 27:14)

wise (27:9, 17; see David and Jonathan, 1 Samuel 23:16).

d. Intimacy with a friend makes us vulnerable. The Psalms remind us that intimacy and vulnerability entail the possibility of betrayal (Psalm 35:11; 41:9; 55:12-14, 20-21; 109:4). Few long-lasting friendships have remained free of some sense of betrayal. Only the capacity to forgive makes it possible for a friendship to endure, but by God's grace a crisis may enable the friendship to reach a new level of commitment and intimacy --> Philippians.

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