

THIRD JOHN: A Tale Of Three Men

by Ray C. Stedman

Third John gives us an intimate glimpse into the life of the early church. It is a delightful accompaniment to the second letter, which was written to a Christian lady about how to handle the false teachers who were abroad in that day.

The third letter of John was written to a Christian man about how to take care of the true teachers who were traveling about ministering the word of God. There is thus both a contrast and a similarity in these last two letters from the pen of John.

Third John shows us something of the problem of personalities within the church, and three people are mentioned here. There is a man named Gaius, to whom this letter is written; another man named Diotrephes, and a third individual named Demetrius. These three men are like three kinds of Christians found in the church in any age. Like all the letters of the New Testament, this is a very up-to-date and relevant letter.

First, there is the man named Gaius. This may be one of the three Gaiuses mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament, although Gaius was a common name in New Testament times, as is John. In any case, John evidently knew him, and addresses the letter to him in a warm and friendly way. We can gather from the letter that Gaius was a genial, gracious, generous individual. Three things that John says about him are important to notice. First, he was strong of soul; that was what warmed John's heart:

Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in health; I know that it is well with your soul. {3 Jn 1:2 RSV}

That is what the Revised Standard Version has, but I think the Authorized Version is a little more accurate:

... that you may prosper in health just as you prosper in soul. {cf, 3 Jn 1:2b KJV}

That is a wonderful thing to say about someone, isn't it? "I wish you could be as strong in body as you are in spirit." It would be interesting to apply this test to people today. If your physical appearance reflected your spiritual state, what would you look like? Would you be a robust individual -- strong and virile? Or would you be a doddering weakling, barely able to move? Well, Gaius was the sort of man about whom the Apostle John could say, "I wish your physical life were as strong as your spiritual life."

Further, he was consistent in his actions:

I greatly rejoiced when some of the brethren arrived and testified to the truth of your life, as indeed you do follow the truth. {3 Jn 1:3 RSV}

He showed the truth in his life, what impressed John was not that he knew the truth, but that he followed the truth. He lived it. He had a consistent life. He did not preach cream and live skim milk. He walked in the truth. And finally, he was generous in his giving:

Beloved, it is a loyal thing you do when you render any service to the brethren, especially to strangers, who have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their Journey as befits God's service. {3 Jn 1:5-6 RSV}

One of the signs that a person has really been genuinely touched by God is that his pocketbook loosens up. His giving becomes generous, gracious, and cheerful, just as God loves. And this man is faithful (loyal) in his giving. This means that he is regular and systematic in his giving. He does not just give when his emotions are moved, but he plans his giving, and he carries it through, faithfully continuing with the work that he has promised.

It is clear, too, that he gave cheerfully, because John says he gave "as befits God's service." That is, worthily of God. He does not want us to give because we feel we have to or because somebody is taking a special offering. Or to feel that if we do not, we will be looked down upon by other Christians. And Gaius gives because he delights in giving.

We will come back to verses seven and eight in a moment, but first let us look at this man Diotrephes:

I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge my authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, prating against me with evil words. And not content with that, he refuses himself to welcome the brethren, and also stops those who want to welcome them and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God. {3 Jn 1:9-11 RSV}

This is the first example in the New Testament church of a church boss -- someone who tries to run the church. He may have been an elder or a deacon or perhaps a pastor, it is difficult to tell. But it was someone who conceived of his role as that of telling everyone else in the church what to do. Now the early church apparently had some kind of a membership roll, and if Diotrephes did not like somebody, he would scratch his name off the list, and put him out of the church. And John objects to that. John indicates here that Diotrephes was guilty of four particular wrong attitudes and actions. For one thing, John says that this man was guilty of slandering the apostle, "prating [preaching] against me with evil words." He refused the authority of the Apostle John.

We know from other letters that the apostles had a unique role in the history of the church. They were to lay the foundations of the church, and were given the authority to settle all questions within the church. It is this apostolic word that is passed along to us in the New Testament, which is why the New Testament is so authoritative to Christians. So here was a man who not only disregarded the authority of the Apostle John, but he even spoke against him. He said slanderous, evil things against the apostle.

Furthermore, he says that Diotrephes is refusing to welcome the brethren who came, when these traveling ministers who went about from place to place, speaking the truth of God, came to this congregation. Diotrephes would have nothing to do with them. He turned them aside and refused to allow them to speak in the church.

A third thing is that he also puts people out of the church who would have taken these men in. He indulges in what we would call today "secondary separation." He not only objected to the men who came, but he objected to those who would have received them. This has been one of the curses of the church ever since. Because of this tendency to refuse fellowship to someone who likes someone you do not like, a wide divisiveness has come into the church, doing injury and harm beyond recall.

But of those three offenses, none was as severe as the thing John puts first. The most serious problem Diotrephes had was that he put himself first. He loved to be first, which is a dead give-away that he was acting in the flesh. This is always the philosophy of the flesh -- me first. Me first, and the devil take the hindmost. In doing that, he was robbing the Lord Jesus of his prerogative. It is he who has the right to pre-eminence; he should be first, but here is a man who put himself first, and that is the really serious thing.

Unfortunately, there are plenty of men like Diotrephes in the churches today, and they are always characterized by this attitude. They want to be first. They want part of the glory. They rob God of his inheritance, stealing that which alone belongs to the Almighty. I remember reading some years ago that Dr. H.E. Robertson, an outstanding leader among the Southern Baptists and a great Greek scholar, once wrote an editorial in the denominational magazine about Diotrephes. Later, the editor reported that twenty-five deacons wrote to cancel their subscriptions, feeling personally attacked.

Now let us see what John's counsel is in this situation. Notice that he does not advise Gaius to organize a split away from the church. Rather, he says,

Beloved, do not imitate evil but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen God. {3 Jn 1:11}

In other words, do not follow these men who want the preeminence. If you see somebody who is always jockeying for position in Christian relationships, always wanting to be in the public eye, do not follow him. He is following his own way and not that of God.

There is, finally, a third generation mentioned here, Demetrius, and all we know of him is what John says:

Demetrius has testimony from every one, and from the truth itself; [a widely accepted and honored man] I testify to him too, and you know my testimony is true. {3 Jn 1:12 RSV}

He is speaking here as an apostle with the gift of discernment. Now He says, "I want to underscore what everybody thinks about Demetrius. Here's a man you can trust. He is a man of the truth. He has borne testimony from all that he is to be trusted." Evidently, Demetrius was the bearer of this letter to Gaius, and was probably one of those missionaries who traveled from place to place. I reserved verses seven and eight until now to comment on Demetrius, because they describe the kind of man of which he was a sample:

For they have set out for his sake and have accepted nothing from the heathen. So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth. {3 Jn 1:7-8 RSV}

These words describe the first group of traveling missionaries. As they went from place to place they would enjoy the hospitality of the various churches. They labored as evangelists in that area, reaching out into places where the church had not yet gone, being supported and strengthened by these various churches.

The Apostle John says three things of them. He says first that they have gone out; they have left things behind. They gave up their income and their work, and went out to obey this higher calling. Not everyone goes -- that was true in the early church as it is today. There were some, such as Gaius, who were to stay to help support these men. But there were others to whom the Holy Spirit said, "Come, I've called you to a special task." Their motive is given here, too: "...for his sake." Literally, for the name's sake -- the name of Jesus.

Back in Old Testament times, the Jews treated the name of God in a unique way. The name of God, Jehovah, which appears throughout the Old Testament, was called the Ineffable Tetragrammaton. Tetragrammaton means four letters, and ineffable means unspeakable, or incommunicable. So whenever they came to these four Hebrew letters for God they did not dare speak them, so holy was the name. Even when the scribe wrote them, he would change the pen away and continue with another one. Scribes also changed their garments before they would write the sacred name, so reverently did they regard the name of God. In the famous passage of Deuteronomy, "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord" {Deut 6:4 RSV}, the name occurs twice, which would have required two changes of clothes and four pens to execute.

In the New Testament, then, the name is that of Jesus. The Apostle Paul says,

God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, ... {Phil 2:9-10a RSV} and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. {Phil 2:11 RSV}

Concern for his name was the underlying motive for missionary work in the first century. It ought to be the underlying motive for missionaries today. It is not the need of people that calls us out to different places in the world to preach the gospel. Need is abundant everywhere. Everyone without Christ is in need. And sometimes the most pathetic cases are not those who have physical needs, but those who have everything materially, but who are wretched in their inner spirit.

I remember when John R.W. Stott, speaking at a conference, said that it was primarily a jealousy for the name of God, a conviction that he should not be denied what is rightfully his, that should be the great motive for

missionaries -- that the Lord Jesus had died for the sins of men everywhere and that he longs to have from every tribe and nation a people for his name.

Now notice the part that the people who stay home are to have:

So we ought to support such men, that we may be fellow workers in the truth. {3 Jn 1:8 RSV}

Wouldn't it be wonderful if, after you got to glory, God wrote "FWT" after your name, in addition to whatever other degrees you may have. Fellow Worker in the Truth. What a degree to have!

Now John closes his letter with these very personal words:

I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face. Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends, every one of them. {3 Jn 1:13-15 RSV}

What an intimate little letter. It seems as though it came not only from John, but from the Lord himself. I like to read this letter as if it is reflecting what the Lord Jesus is saying to his own church. He is really saying to us, "There is much that I'd write to you about." He has written a whole book here, and he has much more to tell us about, but he says, "I'd rather not write with pen and ink. But I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face."

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, we thank you that your name has lost none of its ancient power to attract and bring us to yourself. We pray that you will strengthen our hearts and encourage us to honor your name here below until we see thee face to face. We ask in your name, Amen.

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