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**Comments on
the 3rd Epistle of John**

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By F.B. Hole

IN CERTAIN FEATURES the third Epistle of John is very like his second, yet in its main theme it is the converse, and at the same time the complement, of the second, as we shall see.

Like the second it is an epistle of a private nature, yet containing in its brief verses instruction of such an important kind that the Spirit of God has seen it needful to give it a permanent niche in the inspired Word. We cannot say with any certainty whether Gaius, to whom it was written, is to be identified with one of the others bearing that name, of whom we read. The Gaius of Acts 19:29, was a man of Macedonia. The Gaius of Acts 20:4, was "of Derbe," a city in Asia Minor. The Gaius of 1 Corinthians 1:14, was a Corinthian, and he was almost certainly the Gaius of Romans 16:23, who was host to the Apostle Paul. This Gaius may very well have lived on to old age, and still exercised his hospitality when John wrote. If so, he

presents us with a very delightful picture of one who did not grow weary in well-doing.

Be that as it may, the Gaius of our Epistle is presented to us as a saint characterized by spiritual prosperity. John bears witness, in the second verse, to the fact that his soul prospered to such an extent that he could only desire that his bodily health might equal the health of his soul. There are seasons when we express our wishes and desires the one for the other. How often are we able truthfully to indulge in a wish like that? Not often, we fear! With the most of us the health of the body exceeds the health of the soul. We meet one another and enquire, How are you? Taking it for granted that the enquiry refers to the body, we say cheerfully (as a rule) Quite well, thank you. If the enquiry were, How is it with your soul? — what should we say?

The assurance that John had as to the spiritual prosperity of Gaius was not gained by personal contact, for he was at a distance and communicating by letter. It was gained through testimony borne by others. Certain brethren had arrived in John's locality and they spoke of him; and what they had to say bore witness to the fact that the truth was dwelling in him and that it

found expression in his life, for he walked in truth. That which is in us comes out in our activities.

The Lord Himself laid down as a principle that, "out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks" (Matt. 12:34). Here we find another principle of life which is a companion to it — that which dwells in us characterizes our walk. If Satan's lie dwells in us we are bound to walk in falsity and crookedness in regard to God. When truth is in us by the Spirit of God (as we saw when considering 2 John 2) we shall walk in the truth, even though we walk in the midst of this crooked world. The walk of a Christian is to be light in the midst of darkness, and truth in the midst of error.

In the second Epistle John tells us that he rejoiced greatly in finding the children of the elect lady walking in truth. Here he goes even a step further, in saying that no greater joy was his than this. Gaius appears to come under the term, "my children." If this means that he was a convert of John, it would mean that he was not one of the others named Gaius, who are mentioned in Scripture. However John probably uses the term in a pastoral way here, as he evidently does in his first Epistle (2:1; 3:7; etc.). He had a fatherly interest in all the saints who came

within the sphere of his ministry. Peter warns the elders not to act as "lords over God's heritage." By his example John shows us that the true attitude for an elder is that of a father filled with love and solicitude for his children. It would have been well if all who have exercised rule amongst the saints had followed his steps.

In verses 5, 6 and 7 we discover what it was that moved the Apostle to write in this strain. The brethren who had come and testified of the truth that was in Gaius, were evidently these humble labourers in the Lord's service, to whom he had shown hospitality and whom he had helped forward on their journey. The love he had shown them and the service which he had rendered to them, just because they served the Lord and went forth in His Name, was a clear proof of the truth that was in him: and the more so because they were strangers to him.

The end of verse 5 might lead us to suppose that there were two classes in question: (1) the brethren, and (2) strangers. The better attested reading however appears to be, "the brethren, and that strangers." It was right to serve the brethren who were well known to him; but to serve brethren who were complete strangers just because they served the common Master, was in-

deed to act "faithfully." The truth is that the saints are one, and that the Name of the Lord Jesus binds all who serve in that Name together, and that love is the cementing power in the Christian circle. To this truth Gaius was faithful. It was in him, and he walked in it.

Not only did these brethren go forth for the sake of the Name, but they took also the place of dependence upon their Master. They did not take anything of the Gentiles, or nations; though they moved among the nations and preached the Word in their hearing. They made it very plain that they were not seeking any gain of a material sort for themselves, but seeking to give to their hearers that which would be gain of a spiritual sort. In this they were followers of the Apostle Paul, who himself was a follower of the Lord, who said, "It is more blessed to give than to receive" (Acts 20:33-35).

These were the people whom Gaius had received into his house, showing them loving hospitality, although on arrival, they were strangers to him. Not only did he entertain them but he set them forward on their journey "after a godly sort," or "worthily of God." That being so, he must have treated them with no mean kindness! Had he set them forward in a way that

was worthy of a prince, it would have been something great; but he did it in a way that was worthy of God! He evidently viewed them in the true light. However insignificant in themselves, they were servants of Christ, identified with the Name that is above every name. As being such, Gaius received them. He saw them, not in the light of his own personal likes or dislikes, but in the light of what they were as the little servants of an illustrious Master; and so Gaius walked in the truth and proved that the truth was in him.

The example of Gaius is placed permanently before us in the Scriptures not merely that we may admire it, but that we may follow it. Moreover, it is not merely something which we may do; something which is within our rights, and permissible, and which no Diotrephes can rightly object to our doing. It is something which we must do if we would be walking in the truth. Note that in verse 8 the word "ought" is used. It is not, "We therefore may receive such," but, "We therefore OUGHT to receive such." Now "ought" is a word which expresses obligation and not what is optional. It is "such" that we ought to receive; that is, those who truly come in His Name. If we do not receive SUCH, we are not walking in the truth.

On the other hand by receiving such we become "fellow-helpers to the truth." This is a very encouraging statement, especially to those of us who may not be possessed of any shining gift. There is the ever-present danger for the man of one talent that he should hide it in the earth and do nothing. Now though we may not have the gift that would qualify us to be preachers of the truth, or even to be active propagators of the truth in other and lesser ways, we may take our share and become helpers with the truth by identifying ourselves with those who do more actively labour, and helping them by caring for their needs.

It is frequently the case that our true convictions and attitude are most effectually seen in quite small details. In the days of long ago Rahab showed that she really did believe in the God of Israel and cast in her lot with Him by receiving the spies in peace. At the judgment of the living nations, which is yet to come, according to Matthew 25, those who are the sheep and blessed of God, reveal the state of their hearts by receiving the messengers of the Son of Man, whom He owns as His brethren. And these today, who go forth with the truth, are to be received, if we too are of the truth and fellow-workers with it.

This is the converse of the instruction contained in the second Epistle. There, he who does not bring the truth is to be refused access to the believer's house, and there is to be not the least identification with him. Here the brother, even though a stranger, who is diligently carrying the truth for the sake of the Name, is to be received, and we are glad to be identified with him because of the truth he brings. In either case the truth is the test, and all merely personal considerations are ruled out of the question.

In verses 9 and 10 we find an exposure of the sad state of things in a certain church, which made it needful for the Apostle to write in this way. Nothing is said as to the locality of "the church" in question. It was elsewhere probably than where Gaius lived. Diotrephes was a prominent man in it, and very possibly Demetrius, mentioned in verse 12, was in it too. Diotrephes would by no means receive these brethren. He took a very strong line against them, forbidding others to receive them and even casting out of the church. Also he would receive no directions from the Apostle, seeking to overthrow the apostolic authority by malicious talk.

It would seem to have been a case of the local elder or bishop lording it over God's heritage, the assembly, just as is forbidden in Peter's Epistle; and he who would do a thing of that kind must of necessity take up an insubordinate position as regards apostolic authority. The one who would fly in the face of what Peter had written years before, would not now be likely to bow to what is written by John.

Why did Diotrephes act in this way? The excuse very probably was that these travelling brethren were unauthorized men, and that he was standing for what was orderly and official. But the underlying motive of his attitude and action is unmasked in the words, "who loves to have the pre-eminence." The work of these men was in some way a challenge to the place that Diotrephes held, and loved to hold. Hence he could not tolerate them.

Again and again the Spirit of God has worked outside of officialism, and we do well to note it. It was so with the prophets that God raised up in the midst of Israel. It was so in supreme measure in the case of our Lord Himself. He was regarded as an unofficial upstart by the religious leaders of His day, and His authority was strongly challenged (see Matt. 21:23). Paul

too, entered upon his career in an unofficial way, as Galatians 1:15-23 bears witness. The fact is that the Lord raises up servants according to His sovereign pleasure, and asks neither permission nor counsel of any man. Every distinct awakening or revival in these later days has been marked by this same feature. Officialism has not helped, even if it has not opposed.

It is worthy of remark that, whether in this epistle or the previous one, the only test proposed in regard to professed servants of the Lord is that of the truth. Did they bring it or did they not? If the Apostles had undertaken to authorize and send forth preachers of the Word, or if they had appointed a committee to do it, the presence or absence of the authorization would have been the test. We live in a day in which human authorization of that kind abounds, and the results of it are obvious. Men abound who have the authorization right enough, but they do not bring the truth. They use the authorization to accredit the error they propagate, which is a fearful evil.

It is quite a common idea that the man should accredit the message — So-and-so is duly ordained, so what he says must be right. Or it may take this form: So-and-so is such a good man, so earnest, so gifted, so spiritual, therefore he cannot be wrong.

The whole principle however, is a false one. The true principle is just the reverse. The message accredits the man. The Lord's words in Luke 9:49-50, virtually enunciate this principle; and it is clearly stamped on both 2 John and 3 John. The man is not the test of the truth: the truth is the test of the man. How important then that we should be so established in the truth that we can use it as a test.

The action of Diotrephes did not lack anything as regards vigour. He did not receive these stranger brethren, and hindered others doing so. He would not have them in the assembly. And further he would not receive the Apostle, as regards his authority at least, and spoke against him with malice. Very possibly he regarded his vigour as a proof of his being faithful to what was orderly and dignified. The root from which it sprang, however was the old Pharisaic one of the love of place and pre-eminence. It was Gaius who was faithful and not he (see verse 5).

The casting of these brethren out of the church may not have been full excommunication, as it was his personal doing and not assembly action; but evidently he would allow them no place or liberty in the assembly. In the same way "receives us not" hardly means that he did not receive John to break bread,

for John was at a distance. It does mean that he would not receive his authority as an Apostle, and did his best by malicious talk to undermine his authority in the minds of others.

Now all this was but "evil," as verse 11 indicates; and we are not to follow it. We solemnly believe that this "prating against" the servants of the Lord "with malicious words" is a very sore evil today. To blacken a man's character because you cannot refute his arguments is a well-known controversial trick, but it is doubly despicable when indulged in amongst those who have to contend as to the truth. Let us eschew it as an evil, and follow what is good. In the latter part of verse 11 we have another instance of how John reasons in the abstract, as to good and evil, but we do well to allow its full force in our consciences. How do we stand as to it? Are we of God, or have we not seen Him?

Demetrius is brought before us as an example we may well follow. All knew that he was a follower of the good, and John himself could bear witness to that effect. But above all this the truth itself bore witness to him. The truth presents us with an unerring standard of what is good, and if the course of Demetrius were examined in the light of the truth, the truth itself gave

a good report in his favour. We shall all of us be ultimately examined in the light of the truth when we stand before the judgment seat of Christ. What is our report going to be? Good or bad?

Our little Epistle closes in very similar fashion to the second. As with the elect lady, so with Gaius, the face to face conversation was far better than the letter. But as it was an urgent thing, brooking no delay, to fortify the one against the subtle approaches of evil, so it was urgent to confirm the other in his reception and support of those who were good and true, even when others refused them.

In the closing sentences the Apostle speaks of the brethren who were with him and those with Gaius as "the friends." This carries our minds back to John 15, where we find the Lord saying, "Ye are My friends, if ye do whatsoever I command you;" and again, "I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of My Father I have made known to you." The obedient saint is the one to be brought into this wonderful intimacy, and therefore to be acknowledged as a friend of Christ.

In contrast with the wilful and disobedient Diotrophes there were those who were indeed the friends of Christ, and such were acknowledged as friends by the Apostle and all those who walked in truth.

We each may well ask ourselves in closing this question — If the Apostle John were amongst us today, would he acknowledge me as a FRIEND?