

Third John

Scripture: 3 John

Code: MSB64

Title

The epistle's title is "3 John." It is the third in a series of 3 epistles that bear the Apostle John's name. Third John and 2 John present the closest approximation in the New Testament to the conventional letter form of the contemporary Greco-Roman world, since they were addressed from an individual to individuals. Both 2 and 3 John are the shortest epistles in the NT, each containing less than 300 Greek words, so as to fit on a single papyrus sheet (cf. v. 13).

Author and Date

The author is the Apostle John. He describes himself in v. 1 as "The Elder" which conveys the advanced age of the apostle, his authority and his eyewitness status especially during the foundational period of Christianity when John was involved with Jesus' ministry (cf. 2 John 1). The precise date of the epistle cannot be determined. Since the structure, style, and vocabulary closely approximate 2 John (v. 1 [cf. 2 John 1]; v. 4 [cf. 2 John 4]; v. 13 [cf. 2 John 12]; v. 14 [cf. 2 John 12]), most likely John composed the letter at the same time or soon after 2 John, ca. A.D. 90–95. As with 1 and 2 John, the apostle probably composed the letter during his ministry at Ephesus in the latter part of his life.

Background and Setting

Third John is perhaps the most personal of John's 3 epistles. While 1 John appears to be a general letter addressed to congregations scattered throughout Asia Minor, and 2 John was sent to a lady and her family (2 John 1), in 3 John the apostle clearly names the sole recipient as "the beloved Gaius" (v. 1). This makes the epistle one of a few letters in the NT addressed strictly to an individual (cf. Philemon). The name "Gaius" was very common in the first century (e.g., Acts 19:29; 20:4; Rom. 16:23; 1 Cor. 1:14), but nothing is known of this individual beyond John's salutation, from which it is inferred that he was a member of one of the churches under John's spiritual oversight.

As with 2 John, 3 John focuses on the basic issue of hospitality but from a different perspective. While 2 John warns against showing hospitality to false teachers (2 John 7–11), 3 John condemns the lack of hospitality shown to faithful ministers of the Word (vv. 9,10). Reports came back to the apostle that itinerant teachers known and approved by him (vv. 5–8) had traveled to a certain congregation where they were refused hospitality (e.g., lodging and provision) by an individual named Diotrephes who domineered the assembly (v. 10). Diotrephes went even further, for he also verbally slandered the Apostle John with malicious accusations and excluded anyone from the assembly who dared challenge him (v. 10).

In contrast, Gaius, a beloved friend of the apostle and faithful adherent to the truth (vv. 1–4), extended the correct standard of Christian hospitality to itinerant ministers. John wrote to commend

the type of hospitality exhibited by Gaius to worthy representatives of the gospel (vv. 6–8) and to condemn the high-handed actions of Diotrephes (v. 10). The apostle promised to correct the situation personally and sent this letter through an individual named Demetrius, whom he commended for his good testimony among the brethren (vv. 10–12).

Historical and Theological Themes

The theme of 3 John is the commendation of the proper standards of Christian hospitality and the condemnation for failure to follow those standards.

Interpretive Challenges

Some think that Diotrephes may either have been a heretical teacher or at least favored the false teachers who were condemned by 2 John. However, the epistle gives no clear evidence to warrant such a conclusion, especially since one might expect that John would have mentioned Diotrephes' heretical views. The epistle indicates that his problems centered around arrogance and disobedience, which is a problem for the orthodox as well as the heretic.

Outline

I. The Commendation Regarding Christian Hospitality (1–8)

II. The Condemnation Regarding Violating Christian Hospitality (9–11)

III. The Conclusion Regarding Christian Hospitality (12–14)

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