

The Setting of 2 John and 3 John

John Polhill

John Polhill is Senior Professor of New Testament Interpretation at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Dr. Polhill has also studied at Harvard Divinity School; the University of St. Andrews; Princeton Theological Seminary; and the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to contributing to numerous journals, reference works, and denominational publications, he has authored *Acts* in the New American Commentary series (Broadman and Holman, 1992) and *Paul and His Letters* (Broadman and Holman, 1999). A devoted churchman, Dr. Polhill has served as pastor of congregations in Virginia, Kentucky, and Massachusetts.

Introduction

Second and 3 John are among the most neglected books in the New Testament. This seems to have been true from an early date. The first clear reference to the Johannine epistles was by Irenaeus in the latter part of the second century. He knew of both 1 John and 2 John and attributed them to John the apostle, whom he also saw as the author of the Fourth Gospel. He did not mention 3 John, as is true also of the Muratorian Canon, a list of scripture used by the church in Rome around A.D. 200. It lists only the first two epistles and attributes both to the apostle John. In his discussion of books used by the churches Eusebius (early fourth century) lists the second and third epistles as being used by some churches but disputed by others. Even after the canon was finalized at our twenty-seven books in the Greek and Latin-speaking churches, the Syrian Orthodox Church omitted 2 and 3 John from its standard translation of around A.D. 400 and did not include them until its revised translation a hundred years later.¹

Three factors likely contributed to the slow acceptance of the latter two Johannine epistles. One is their brevity. Third John is the shortest book in the New Testament, and 2 John comes in a close second. Both could be written on a single papyrus leaf.² A second factor may have been the question of apostolic authorship. The writer of 2 John and 3 John called himself “the Elder,” whereas 1 John is anonymous. There is evidence that this “Elder” designation created some confusion. In the late fourth century,

for instance, Jerome referred to all three epistles, maintaining that they were written by the apostle John, but he also noted that others in his day attributed the latter two to a different author (the Elder).³ It is quite likely, however, that the association of the epistles with the apostle John had much to do with these two short writings being included in the canon.

The third factor that probably contributed to the slow acceptance of 2 and 3 John is their content. Second John has very little in it that does not parallel a much fuller treatment in 1 John. Third John contains very little that could be described as doctrinal or edifying, as it mainly deals with a power struggle within the churches. Still, as we hope to show in the brief commentaries that follow, each of the two epistles presents a different issue that is quite relevant to the contemporary church. We can be grateful for their inclusion in our canon.

2 John

The Occasion for the Letter

Second John is closely related to 1 John. Whereas the first epistle is most likely a “general” epistle written for a group of churches, 2 John is addressed to a single congregation but deals with the same problems treated in the first epistle. The main problem for both epistles was false teachers who had led a movement that separated from John’s church.⁴ They were guilty of three errors. First, they had an erroneous view of the incarnation, not accepting the humanity of Jesus (1 John 2:22; 2 John 7). Second, they had a deficient ethic. They claimed to be “above sin”

but at the same time failed to keep God's commandments (1 John 1:8, 10; 2 John 6). Finally, they were deficient in fellowship: they were seemingly cliquish and failed to love their brothers and sisters in Christ (1 John 2:9; 4:20; 2 John 6).

The three errors were all parts of the same package, one reminiscent of the heresy called "Gnosticism" by the second-century church fathers. Gnostics were a group that arose from within Christianity and eventually separated from the church. They were labeled "gnostics" because of their insistence on an esoteric "knowledge" (Greek, *gnōsis*) being necessary for salvation. Heavily influenced by Greek Neo-Platonic thought, they saw all things material as being inferior or even evil. Only the immaterial, spiritual element was seen as good. They believed that those who became perfected in their saving knowledge were able to escape the material and live on a truly spiritual level. In their most radical form, gnostics believed that they had risen above sin, that sin pertained to the material world, and that in their spiritual perfection they completely transcended it. Gnostic groups were usually quite cliquish and had nothing to do with non-gnostic Christians.⁵

It can readily be seen that the error John was combating in his epistles had much in common with Gnosticism. Their denial of the incarnation reflected the gnostic-like estimation of the material world. They could not accept that the divine Christ could take on an inferior human body. Like later gnostics, they claimed to be "above sin" but at the same time were guilty of flagrant sin. And, they were a very exclusive club, failing to love Christians outside their circle.

It is probably wisest not to see the error combated in the Johannine epistles as

a full-blown Gnosticism of the second-century type. Some such term as "protognostic" or "incipient Gnosticism" is more accurate. Later gnostic teachings involved elaborate myths about the fall of humans and the descent of a Redeemer to save them. The false teachers of the Johannine epistles do not seem to have developed to such a point. There *is* evidence apart from the epistles that such speculations were at a beginning stage in Ephesus in John's day. This centers around the figure of Cerinthus. Irenaeus described him as having taught that the divine Christ was a purely spiritual being who never really became flesh but rather descended upon the man Jesus at his baptism, possessing him until the time of the crucifixion, before which he departed and returned to the spirit world.⁶ John may well have been combating some such heresy when he insisted that Christ came both by the water *and* the blood (the crucifixion, 1 John 5:6).⁷ Indeed, John knew Cerinthus. The early church historian Eusebius records a tradition about how John once fled from the public bath house in Ephesus when he recognized that the heretic Cerinthus was inside.⁸ Evidence is not sufficient to see Cerinthianism as the specific error combated in the epistles,⁹ but John's false teachers seem to have held some of the same views, especially their rejection of the incarnation.

Evidently those who held these heretical views had originated in John's circle of churches. In 1 John 2:18-19, John labels them "Anti-Christ" and notes that they "went out from us" but "were really not of us." Otherwise, he says, "they would have remained with us." Many contemporary commentators have consequently labeled these "secessionists." The problem in 2 John is that those who formerly "went

out” are now coming back and threatening the integrity of the churches (v. 10). John warns one “sister congregation” of how to handle them. It is his main reason for writing.

Overview of the Letter

Second John can be divided into three main segments, each corresponding to a standard division of a typical Greek letter in John’s day: the salutation (vv. 1-3), the body of the letter (vv. 4-11), and the conclusion (vv. 12-13). The body comprises the main message of the epistle and consists of three parts: the command to love (4-6), the error of the false teachers (7-9), and shunning the false teachers (10-11).¹⁰

The Salutation (vv. 1-3)

A Greek letter of the Hellenistic period opened with a salutation consisting of three parts: sender, recipient, greeting. It was usually quite brief; for example, “Demetrius to Stephanas, greetings.” In 2 John the sender calls himself “the Elder.” This somewhat obscure designation is actually the internal key to the authorship of all three epistles. Third John is also attributed to the Elder. First John is anonymous. The three epistles seem to be by the same person. They are written in the same style, utilizing a similar vocabulary, reflecting similar life settings.¹¹ From the time of Irenaeus on, early church tradition maintained that the apostle John was the common author of the epistles and the Gospel of John.¹² On the other hand a number of modern scholars latch on to the designation “Elder” and see the Elder as a different John from the apostle, through quite likely being a disciple of the apostle. This is based on a passage from Papias (early second century) that Eusebius quotes and understands to be

speaking of two Johns in Ephesus, the apostle and an Elder John.¹³ The quote is somewhat obscure and seems to apply the term elder to the apostle as well as the other John. In itself the term elder is quite general and could apply to the apostles as well as some other church leader. The term was used by Jews for their leaders (Acts 4:5). It was taken over by the Christians in their church organization (Acts 11:30; 1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:5). Peter called himself a “fellow elder” (1 Pet 5:1). The term comes from the Greek word meaning old and carries a tone of veneration. It well fits the figure of the apostle John, whom Eusebius depicts as returning from his exile on Patmos to Ephesus after the death of the Emperor Domitian.¹⁴

John addressed his epistle to “the elect lady and her children.” It is possible that this refers to an individual, “lady Electa,” but more likely that it is a reference to a congregation. In the New Testament, Christians are often called “elect, chosen” (e.g., Rom 8:33; Col 3:12; 1 Pet 1:1). Second John concludes with a similar appellation: John writes from and sends greetings from an “elect sister” congregation.

John states that he loves the elect lady “in truth.” This could mean that he “truly” loved them, but more likely referred to their common love for the truth of the gospel. This is all the more likely since he concludes the first verse with a reference to “all who love *the* truth.” “Truth” is an important word in the Johannine literature, referring to the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It is often a virtual synonym for Jesus (John 1:14, 17; John 14:6; 1 John 5:20). Note how John links truth and love. The two belong together. To know truth is to know Jesus, and to know Jesus is to love. The false teachers knew neither.

In verse three John continues to follow

the typical Greek letter form with a greeting. Instead of the usual Greek greeting (*chairein*) or the Hebrew greeting (*shalom*, “peace”), he issues a three-fold greeting of “grace, mercy, and peace.” Paul’s usual greeting was “grace and peace,” utilizing the Hebrew greeting but altering the Greek *chairein* to the distinctly Christian greeting, grace (*charis*).¹⁵ Only twice does Paul add the word “mercy” (1 Tim 1:2; 2 Tim 1:2). It is significant that John adds the verb “will be” in his reference to the three. Usually the verb is omitted and an implied wish is expressed—“*may* grace and peace *be* with you.” John’s future verb is less of a wish than an assurance: for those who share the love of Jesus and live in His truth, His unmerited grace, the mercy of His unlimited forgiveness, and the peace that comes to a life lived under His Lordship *will certainly be* with them.

The Body of the Letter (vv. 4-11)

The command to love (vv. 4-6). John expresses his joy at hearing that some members of the elect lady’s congregation are walking “in truth.” In similar fashion Paul often referred to his happiness over receiving good reports about the congregations to whom he was writing (e.g., Rom 1:8; Col 1:4; cp. 3 John 3). The reference to “some” need not imply that others were not walking in the truth, only that John had received news pertaining to a portion of the congregation.¹⁶

In verses 4-6 John links three terms—truth, love, and command. As we have seen, the truth is the ultimate revelation of God that has come in Jesus Christ. The supreme expression of that revelation is God’s love: “God *is* love, and the person who abides in love abides in God and God abides in him” (1 John 4:16). When we abide in God’s love, we have a command

to love—not a new command, but one that we have had “from the beginning” (v. 5). John may well be referring to Jesus giving the love command to the disciples in the farewell discourses (John 13:34; cp. 1 John 3:11).

Verse 6 presents a seeming tautology: love is walking according to God’s command, and God’s command is to love. The resolution is to distinguish between the singular command to love and the plural “walking according to his commands.”¹⁷ “Walking” is an Old Testament metaphor for conduct, and the rabbis referred to their oral interpretation of God’s law as “the walk” (*halakah*).¹⁸ John’s principle here is quite similar to Paul’s statement in Romans 13:8-10 that all the commands of God are summed up in the command to love one’s neighbor. The command to love here in 2 John almost certainly focuses on love for one’s Christian brothers and sisters, but for John that kind of love is rooted in love for God; the two are inseparable (1 John 4:20-21).¹⁹

In verses 4-6 John is already focusing on the problem of the false teachers. They failed to keep both the commandments and the command. They were not walking according to the truth revealed in Christ. Every dimension of their error appears here—their rejection of the truth, their failure to live by God’s moral demands, and their failure to love one another.

The false teachers (vv. 7-9). The specific doctrinal failure of the group who had “gone out” from John’s circle of churches becomes evident in verse 7: they “denied Jesus Christ as coming in flesh.” They denied the incarnation, that in Jesus the divine Word of God became flesh (John 1:14). John singles out the same error in 1 John 4:2f. There he uses the perfect participle to express their refusal to

affirm that Jesus “has come” in the flesh; here the tense is present, “coming in the flesh.” Some interpreters make much of this change in tense, arguing that the reference to “coming” in 2 John points to the future and is a reference to the Parousia.²⁰ Both Greek tenses, however, stress the timelessness of Jesus’ coming. He came in the incarnation and continues to be present. The incarnation did not cease at the Passion. Jesus Christ continues to be both God and man, the perfect intercessor for us in the bosom of the Godhead.

John insisted on the reality of the incarnation. Just as he proclaimed in the prologue to his Gospel (John 1:14), he stressed it also in the prologue to his first epistle—the eternal Word became truly flesh, “we touched him with our own hands” (1 John 1:1). The false teachers could not accept this. To them anything material was inferior, even evil. In their view it was impossible for the eternal, divine revelation of God that took place in Christ to take on human flesh. They held some such view as that of Cerinthus, who spoke of the divine Christ possessing the human Jesus but departing before the crucifixion. Or, they were more thorough Docetists²¹ and argued that the earthly Jesus never had anything at all to do with human flesh but was a mere apparition, only “seeming” to be flesh. Whatever the specific viewpoint of John’s splinter group, they would have shared the widespread dualism of the Greek world of his day, disparaging the material and seeing only the spiritual as good. For them the incarnation was a logical impossibility.

For John, this error was no indifferent matter. It struck at the very heart of the Christian faith. Therefore, he described those who held it as “deceivers” and “Anti-Christ.” Jesus warned of false

prophets who would arise to prey upon believers (Mark 13:5-6). John warned of such deceivers in his first epistle and labeled them there as “Anti-Christ” (1 John 2:18-22). The term is clearly eschatological for John: their presence confirms that we are living in the “last hour.” John seems to have originated the term “Anti-Christ,” but the idea of false Messiahs parading as Christ was well-established in early Christianity (cp. 2 Thess 2:8).²²

John fears that some from the circles of his churches will succumb to the deceptions of the Anti-Christ and may lose what they had worked for (v. 8). This may be a warning that they might miss out on their salvation (cp. 1 John 2:25), although it is also possible that John was speaking of the loss of their “full reward” for their service as Christians.²³ If John is thinking of their complete capitulation to the false teachers, he probably has the loss of “eternal life” in mind, since in his view they had neither the Father nor the Son (1 John 2:22-23).

In verse 9 John describes the false teachers as “progressives.”²⁴ This may have been their own slogan, seeing themselves as truly advanced in their theology. For John, they had “advanced” all right, but had advanced *too far*, going beyond the teaching of Christ.²⁵ Since Christ’s teaching revealed the Father and his unity with the Son, it follows that one who rejects that teaching has neither Father nor Son. John was not rejecting all ideas of progress here. Rather, he was rejecting that type of “progressive” attitude that rejects the solid foundations of the past (John would say “what we have heard from the beginning”) and compromises with the world, as had been the case with the false teachers and their embracing the dualism of the Hellenistic age.

Shunning the false teachers (vv. 10-11). So far, John has said nothing in his second epistle he had not stated in the first (with the possible exception of labeling the false teachers as “progressives”). Now he goes beyond the former epistle: he tells the “sister” congregation how they are to relate to the false teachers should they come to their assembly. They are not to receive them into the house, not even to give them a greeting (v. 10). This harsh statement comes as something of a shock, especially when one bears in mind the many New Testament passages which affirm hospitality as a Christian virtue.²⁶ The issue has another side, however. Jesus instructed his disciples to shake the dust off their feet in witness against a town that rejected their message (Matt 10:14-15). Paul instructed Timothy to avoid false teachers and to instruct his fellow Christians to do likewise (1 Tim 6:20-21; 2 Tim 2:14-19, 23).

It was a case of a false doctrine of the most threatening kind, a teaching that was not consistent with that of Christ (cp. v. 9), which could lead even to the loss of salvation. These verses can be extremely damaging to the Christian community when taken out of context and applied to minor differences of ecclesiastical and doctrinal viewpoint. It is thus imperative to consider the original context to which John applied this directive.

First, the false teachers were not just espousing heretical views about Christ; they were seeking to impose them on congregations like that of John’s “elect lady.” They were *proselytizing*. When John spoke of receiving them into the house he probably was referring to a house church, the house in which the elect lady met. In that context, “receiving” would mean giving them a hearing. John was not

forbidding giving them Sunday dinner; he was telling the church not to provide them a pulpit. Their message had no place in the Christian assembly. It denied the very heart of the Christian faith, that the man Jesus was God incarnate, the ultimate intercessor on our behalf. If Jesus did not share our humanity he could not have been our representative and died on the cross in our place. Docetic heresies allowed no place for the atoning death of Jesus. This was true of Cerinthus, as it was of later Gnosticism, as was the case with John’s false teachers as well.

A second consideration is that the church could not *sponsor* the false teachers. That is most likely the basis for John’s telling them not to “greet” them (v. 10). In first-century Mediterranean culture, greeting someone was tantamount to accepting him into the community. Communities were small and tightly knit. Strangers had no status or recognition in them. If they were to remain it was imperative that they have a patron, a sponsor in the village. When someone accepted or welcomed them into their home, this provided them status, a place in the life of the entire village.²⁷ This is the cultural reality John was facing. To welcome the false teachers amounted to an endorsement of their heretical views. Christians could not sponsor such views, could not “share in their evil works” (v. 11).²⁸

Conclusion to the Letter (vv. 12-13)

John concludes by saying that he has much more to share with the elect lady but that he preferred not to do so “with paper and ink.” The Greek idiom is colorful, being literally “with papyrus and black.” Equally colorful is John’s reference to his speaking with them in person, which is literally “mouth to mouth.” Like Paul,

John probably often had to communicate with his churches by letter when he would much have preferred the “joy” of a personal visit. Also like Paul, he ended his letter with an exchange of greetings. He referred to his own local fellowship as “the children of your elect sister.” The reference to the two sisters, the two congregations, both chosen by God in Jesus Christ, forms a framework for the entire epistle (vv. 1, 13).

3 John

John’s third epistle has much in common with the second. It is brief. It has much the same vocabulary—key words like “love” and “truth.” Both are sent by “the Elder.” The conclusions to the two letters are almost identical. The letters are quite different, however. The third epistle is addressed not to a church but to an individual.²⁹ It makes no mention of a false teaching and does not seem to address any doctrinal issue. The problem addressed in the letter has more to do with church leadership, particularly with regard to the specific issue of providing for itinerant Christian missionaries.

Overview of the Letter

Like 2 John, the third epistle conforms to the typical pattern of a first-century Greek letter. It begins with a salutation (vv. 1-2). The main body of the letter follows (vv. 3-12). It ends with a formal conclusion (vv. 13-15).

Salutation (vv. 1-2)

Like 2 John, 3 John begins with an address that identifies “the Elder” as the sender. The addressee is an individual by the name of Gaius. Although others by that name are mentioned in the New Testament, probably none is to be identi-

fied with the recipient of 3 John, since the name was extremely common in the Roman world.³⁰

A further word should be said about the Elder, whom we would identify as John the apostle and disciple of Jesus. The term “elder” may have pointed to John’s role as the apostolic leader of a community of churches. Paul seems to have filled that role in the various areas where he established churches. He often settled in a major metropolitan area and sent workers out into the surrounding countryside. They established churches and reported back to Paul. Though Paul himself may never have visited a given congregation, he was considered the ultimate authority over the church.³¹ John, who followed Paul in Ephesus, probably exercised the same sort of leadership over the churches of Asia. John was writing the letter to Gaius because an individual in one of the churches was rejecting John’s apostolic leadership by refusing to accept the missionary workers sent out by the apostle.

As in the second epistle, John affirms his love for his addressee “in truth” (v. 1). As there, truth probably refers to the truth of the gospel, the truth that is in Jesus. As in the second epistle, truth is an important word in 3 John, occurring seven times.³² In 2 John the word centers on the false teachers who rejected the truth. In 3 John the word is used in a more positive context, being applied to those who bear witness to the truth.

In the second verse John addresses Gaius as “beloved.” It is a favorite word for John in addressing his fellow Christians.³³ In place of the usual greeting, John substitutes a prayer for Gaius’s health and well-being, a formality often found in Greek letters that in no way implies that

Gaius was in poor health.

Body of the Letter (vv. 3-12)

Gaius's hospitality (vv. 3-8). The body of the letter revolves around three persons: Gaius, Diotrophes, and Demetrius. The greater attention is devoted to the letter's recipient, Gaius, from whom John is requesting assistance in relation to the other two persons.

John begins as he did in 2 John by referring to the good reports he has received from others with regard to his recipient (vv. 3-4). Those who have "come" to John with their positive reports about Gaius were quite likely some of the missionary workers whom John had sent forth. In supporting them Gaius was shown to be conducting himself in accordance with the truth of the gospel. This brought great joy to John.³⁴ John links Gaius with his "children," which may also refer to his apostolic relationship to Gaius as "elder."³⁵

Verses 5-6 make explicit the particular conduct of Gaius that has brought joy to the apostle. Gaius had done a "good work" for the brothers, especially when one considered that the brothers were "strangers" to him. They had borne testimony to his benevolence before the church. His good work is described as "sending them forth in a manner worthy of God." The word for "sending forth" (*propempō*) is something of a technical term for equipping someone with the necessary provisions when they set forth on a journey (Acts 15:3; 21:5; Titus 3:13).

The early church regularly provided for its itinerant missionaries with food, lodging, and provisions for their journey to the next place of witness. Jesus set the pattern with his disciples when he sent them forth on mission. They were to take no purse or

extra provisions but to rely on others to support them (Matt 10:9-10). In a given village they were to rely on the hospitality of a single household (Matt 10:13). Paul was probably alluding to this practice when he insisted on his right of support from the Corinthians (1 Cor 9:4-14). Sometimes the practice seems to have been abused, as is reflected in the elaborate directions pertaining to it in the second century Christian handbook known as the *Didache* (chapter 11). In the *Didache* the itinerant workers are described as "apostles," using the word in its literal sense as "those sent forth." The church is directed that they are to stay in a single household for two days at the most. They are not to go from house to house and are to be sent forth to the next village with only a day's provision of food. If they stay three days or ask for money, they are "false prophets." This seems to be a practice similar to that of 3 John. The difference is that the *Didache* deals with possible failure on behalf of the itinerant workers while 3 John treats a failure of the Christian community to provide for them.

Verses 7-8 focus on the missionary workers. They refused to take any support from the Gentiles, depending solely on the hospitality of their fellow Christians, and thus behaving in a manner worthy of the name of Jesus Christ.³⁶ That they would even consider support from the Gentiles reflects the first-century practice of itinerant philosophers, such as the Cynics. Known as the begging philosophers, Cynics supposedly eschewed earthly goods and depended on strangers to provide for them. Their vow of poverty, however, developed into something of a sham. They became notorious for fleecing the countryside of all they could get. It was possibly the bad reputation of such itinerants that

led Paul to refuse any support from the Corinthians (1 Cor 9:15-18).

The itinerant missionaries thus relied solely on the hospitality of fellow Christians, much like Christian missionaries today. Both then and now, by supporting the missionaries, Christians become “co-workers in the truth” (v. 8).

Diotrephes’s opposition (vv. 9-10). John now focuses on what is most likely the primary reason for his writing—the opposition of a leader in one of the churches by the name of Diotrephes. Whether Gaius is a member of the same church or a nearby congregation is uncertain. The fact that John seems to be informing Gaius about the situation makes it more likely that he is not a member of the same church. John begins by noting that Diotrephes refuses to “receive” him personally. This is really the basic charge: he does not accept the authority of the apostle. Coupled with this is his “love for first place” (*philoprōteuō*). The word used by John is not found in any previous Greek literature, but its meaning is pretty clear. Diotrephes seems to be someone with extreme ego needs, with overweening ambition. In this particular instance, Diotrephes stood in the way of a letter John had written to the church. The letter is lost, but probably dealt with the church providing for traveling missionaries whom John was sending.

In verse 10, John directs four specific charges against Diotrephes. First, he is said to have spoken irresponsible and abusive words against John. John was himself not one to leave the battle to others. He expressed his own desire to come and in person remind Diotrephes of his evil ways. These included the other three charges John leveled against him. All are related to the missionary workers: he refused to accept them himself, he pre-

vented other members from giving them hospitality, and he put those who did so out of the church.

Just what is going on here? Several settings have been suggested. Some have wanted to see Diotrephes as a leader in the movement that had gone out from John’s church and who espoused the false teaching dealt with in the first two epistles. The problem with this view is that John gives no inkling of any doctrinal error on Diotrephes’ part.³⁷ Another suggestion is that John reflects a period of transition in church order when local churches began to break away from the central authority of the old apostolic pattern.³⁸ Others see it as a more restricted problem in a single congregation with one leader determined to “run the show” all by himself, a type of problem that still often rears its ugly head.³⁹

Recommendation of Demetrius (verses 11-12). John ends the body of his letter by commending someone by the name of Demetrius. He begins by urging Gaius to “imitate” not the bad but the good.⁴⁰ In this instance Diotrephes represents the negative example and Demetrius the positive. John further develops the contrast with an antithesis: the one who does good is of God, whereas the one who does bad his never seen him.

Verse 12 is probably intended as a formal recommendation of Demetrius. Letters of recommendation were common in John’s day. A good example is Paul’s recommendation of Phoebe in Rom 16:1. Demetrius may well have been one of John’s missionary workers, quite possibly the bearer of 3 John. If so, John would have been recommending him to Gaius and requesting his support for him. The letter sent to Diotrephes’s congregation (v. 9) may well have been a similar commenda-

tion of John's missionary workers. In any event, Demetrius is given the strongest possible endorsement. Three witnesses attest to his "goodness": "everybody" (i.e., the church as a whole), Demetrius's own faithfulness to the truth, and John's personal testimony. In striking parallel to words in his Gospel, John adds "and you know that our witness is true" (cp. John 19:35; 21:24).

Conclusion to the Letter (vv. 13-15)

Verses 13 and 14 express John's desire to see Gaius in person soon in almost exact parallel to the conclusion of 2 John. John had not expressed a prayer that peace would be upon Gaius in his salutation, but he includes it here. He closes with the customary exchange of greetings, but this time from "the friends." It is the only time Christians are addressed as "friends" in the New Testament (but note John 15:13f.).

Conclusion

The two smallest books in the New Testament present us with two of the biggest problems, problems that continue to confront the church. In 2 John the problem is that of dealing with serious error. When does doctrinal error become a threat to the integrity of the faith? How should we deal with such threats? How do we balance love with truth? For John, the false teachers who had "gone out" from the Christian fellowship were now returning to prey upon it with serious doctrinal aberrations that struck at the very heart of the faith. They could not be endorsed by the church nor given any hearing. For the apostle, who was so eloquent in his emphasis on love in both his Gospel and first epistle, it must have been agonizing to draw such a line, but the false teachers

had "progressed" too far and gone beyond the truth of the gospel. The church today often experiences doctrinal deviations, sometimes serious ones and sometimes debatable ones or those not as threatening to the faith. It is often too easy a solution to slam the door on those who differ from us and point to 2 John as a warrant for such action. It is likewise too easy to retreat into a glib tolerance which claims that love conquers all and doctrine does not really matter anyway. Somehow we have to find the balance between truth and love, and that is not always easy.

Third John confronts us with a very different problem, perhaps even a more prevalent one in our day than the threat of doctrinal failure—that of human craving for power. It can arise on almost any level of church life—the layman who seeks to dominate the local church, ministers who compete with each other for churches, denominational leaders who jockey for the choice posts. Genuine truth and love become secondary, except for the "Diotrephic" sort of love for being first. Third John warns us about the perils of the ego. Diotrephes's lust for power caused him to hinder the Christian missionaries and, thus, undermine the central evangelistic task that is at the heart of the gospel. It did so then, and it can do the same now.

ENDNOTES

¹For A detailed discussion of the canonical history of the three epistles, see C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles* (Moffatt New Testament Commentary; New York: Harper, 1946), xiii-xv.

²Akin notes that the Greek text of 2 John contains only 245 words and 3 John 219 (Daniel L. Akin, *1,2,3 John* [New American Commentary; Nashville: Broadman

& Holman, 2001], 217, 235).

³Jerome, *De Viris Illustribus* 9.18.

⁴We are assuming that the apostle John was the author of all three epistles. The issue is discussed below in connection with 2 John 1.

⁵It should be noted that there was no single gnostic group but many varieties of Gnosticism, usually centering around various teachers, each with his own particular system of “knowledge.”

⁶Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 3.11.1.

⁷The “blood” almost certainly refers to Christ’s atoning death on the cross. The “water” is less certain, and could refer to the water of birth, or that which poured from Jesus’ side at the crucifixion (John 19:34), or the coming of the Spirit on Jesus at His baptism (John 1:32ff.). Also note that all translations of the Greek text in this article are my own.

⁸Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.28. He attributes the anecdote to Polycarp.

⁹The epistles give no evidence for some of Cerinthus’s main views, such as that of a millennial reign of Christ taking place immediately after the resurrection.

¹⁰I am following here the outline given in my brief commentary: “First, Second and Third John,” in *Mercer Commentary on the Bible* (Macon, GA: Mercer University, 1995), 1311-18.

¹¹Some interpreters have challenged the assumption that the three are by the same author. The most extreme position is that of R. Bultmann, who argued for three different writers (*The Johannine Epistles* [trans. P.

O’Hara et al.; Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973], 1).

¹²The question of whether the Fourth Gospel and the epistles are by a different author is a major debated point in itself and is beyond the scope of this paper. We are assuming a common authorship of all four. For the view that the Gospel and epistles are by different hands, see Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, xlvi-lvi. An excellent summary of the debate can be found in I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, New International Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978), 31-42.

¹³Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.39.3-7.

¹⁴Ibid., 3.23. For further treatment of the term “elder” see Raymond E. Brown, *The Epistles of John* (Anchor Bible; Garden City, NJ: Doubleday, 1982), 647-51.

¹⁵John employs the word “grace” only rarely—here, possibly in 3 John 4 (a textual variant), and three times in verses 14-17 of the prologue to his Gospel. “Love” is his favorite word, and, in his usage, is virtually synonymous with grace when used of God.

¹⁶Contra Smalley, who sees this verse as evidence of conflict within the congregation (Stephen S. Smalley, *1,2,3 John* [Word Biblical Commentary; Waco, TX: Word, 1984], 323).

¹⁷B. F. Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John: The Greek Text with Notes and Essays* (repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957), 228.

¹⁸D. Moody Smith, *First, Second, and Third John* (Interpretation; Louisville: John Knox, 1991), 143.

¹⁹See R. Alan Culpepper, *1 John, 2*

John, 3 John (Atlanta: John Knox, 1985), 121.

²⁰For a discussion of this view, see John Polhill, “An Analysis of 2 John and 3 John,” *Review and Expositor* 67 (1970): 464.

²¹“Docetism,” from the Greek word *dokeō*, “to seem, to appear to be.”

²²For a helpful discussion, see Akin, *1, 2, 3 John*, 267-70.

²³For the loss of reward for service, see Culpepper, *1 John, 2 John, 3 John*, 123.

²⁴The Greek word *proagō*, meaning “to go ahead, advance.” It can have a positive nuance—to lead the way—or a negative tone—to go too far. In 2 John 9 it is obviously the latter.

²⁵It is debated whether this is an objective genitive (the teaching about Christ), or a subjective genitive (the teaching which Christ brought). Either is possible, but the Johannine emphasis on Christ’s revealing the Father seems to tip the scales in the direction of “Christ’s teaching” (cp. John 7:16-17; 8:19).

²⁶Note Acts 16:15; Rom 12:13; 1 Tim 5:10; Titus 1:8; 1 Pet 4:9; and, especially, 3 John 5-8. Jesus likewise taught that we should love even our enemies (Matt 5:43-48).

²⁷This discussion is based on an article by Bruce Malina, “The Received View and What it Cannot Do: III John and Hospitality,” *Semeia* 35 (1986):171-194. See the useful summary by Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 213-16.

²⁸For a balanced discussion of the context of John’s injunction see

Gary Burge, *The Letters of John* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 237-42.

²⁹Observe that the three Johannine epistles exemplify three different kinds of recipients: 1 John is a “general epistle” for a group of congregations, 2 John is for a single congregation, and 3 John is for an individual.

³⁰A Roman citizen had three names (e.g., Gaius Julius Caesar). For the first name (praenomen), only a handful of names was used (Gaius, Marcus, etc.). See John Polhill, *Paul and His Letters* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), 16.

³¹Colosse is an excellent example. Paul never seems to have visited the church. It was established by Paul’s co-worker Epaphras. When doctrinal problems developed, Epaphras reported them to Paul. As apostolic leader Paul wrote Colossians to address the issue. For Paul’s missionary strategy, see *ibid*, 98-100.

³²Verses 1, 3 (twice), 4, 8, 12 (twice).

³³Four times in 3 John (1, 2, 5, 11); six times in 1 John (2:7; 3:2, 21; 4:1, 7, 11).

³⁴A variant text of verse 4 reads “grace” (*charin*), instead of “joy” (*charan*). The latter has much better manuscript support, despite Westcott, *The Epistles of St. John*, 238, who argues for “grace.”

³⁵In the general epistle of 1 John, John frequently addressed his readers as “little children” (*teknia*): 2:1, 12, 28; 3:7, 18; 5:21.

³⁶The “Name” is used throughout the New Testament to refer to Christ and indeed the whole gospel that revolves around him (e.g., Acts 5:41;

9:16; 15:26; 21:13; Rom 1:5; Phil 2:9). Westcott calls it “in essence the sum of the Christian creed” (*The Epistles of St. John*, 239).

³⁷One could possibly argue that the third epistle was the first to be written and that it reflects the beginning of the conflict, when the false teachers (like Diotrephes) first separated from the other congregations *before* John’s awareness of their doctrinal errors.

³⁸See Polhill, “An Analysis of II and III John,” 468-70.

³⁹See Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 354-55.

⁴⁰Imitation was a common means of moral instruction in the Greco-Roman world. Paul often urged his readers to imitate Christ or God or even himself insofar as he modeled Christlikeness: e.g., 1 Cor 4:16; 11:1; Eph 5:1; Phil 3:17.