

Truth for Today

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Short letters in the New Testament: 3 John - Healthy Churches

Some time ago I read a book written by Don Carson called *"Memoirs of an ordinary pastor"* (ISBN: 978-1433501999). The book is about Don Carson's parents, and the pastoral ministry of his father, Tom. Now, Tom Carson wasn't a famous person - I certainly hadn't heard of him before - but he quietly got on with what the Lord had given him to do. It's a little while since I've read the book but it has stuck in my mind. The impression that I gained of Tom as I read the book was that he was a godly, warm-hearted and devoted Christian - in other words, a very good example. The title of the book is well chosen, because as you read the book, you see that no-one is really "ordinary". If we do what the Lord has asked us to do, in the place where He has called us, then we will be pleasing Him and participating in His plan. We might be considered "ordinary" as far as the world is concerned, but not by God.

As I read through John's third epistle in preparation for this talk, I thought of Don Carson's book and its title. It seemed to me that an adaptation of that book title would be a good descriptor for John's third epistle. 3 John is a personal letter from the Apostle to a Christian called Gaius. We could describe this epistle as an encouragement for an ordinary Christian. As far as we can tell, Gaius does not appear to have been a missionary, or a pastor, or an elder, or a teacher. He isn't spoken of as possessing particular gifts or as occupying a prominent place in his local church. What comes across instead is that he was a faithful believer who practised hospitality and looked after the needs of travelling preachers. In just a few verses we are told that his soul prospered (3 John 2), that he walked in truth (3 John 3), and that he showed love to other Christians (3 John 4-5).

To many people, Gaius may have been simply an "ordinary Christian", and yet his name and actions have been recorded for us in the Word of God. In truth, no-one is just an "ordinary Christian". We have all *"been chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world"*, as Ephesians 1:4 tells us. We are all individuals - individually loved by God, and with an individual purpose. Again in Ephesians we read, *"For we are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them"* (Ephesians 2:10). The good works that God has prepared for me might seem quite ordinary and unspectacular, but if I am doing what God has planned, then I will be fulfilling His purpose. As I was preparing this talk, I was also encouraged by reading the Apostle Paul's words in Philippians 3:12: *"Not that I have already attained, or am already perfected; but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ Jesus has also laid hold of me."*

Now Gaius was indeed a faithful individual, but he did not practice his Christianity in isolation. As I mentioned before, he practised hospitality and looked after the needs of travelling preachers. People like Gaius make up healthy churches because they are others-centred and they get on with what God has given them to do. Let's have a closer look at what John the Apostle says about Gaius, and what we can learn about healthy Christianity and healthy churches.

In 3 John 1, John calls himself *"the Elder."* John was an Apostle, but in this letter he is stressing his eldership. As an elder, John is caring for Gaius and he wants to encourage him. Since he is writing to an individual, rather than to a whole church, the designation of elder seems very appropriate, although of course this letter has been preserved for all of us as part of the Word of God. John is acting as a true elder, as opposed to Diotrephes, whom we shall consider later.

In 3 John 2-4, we read that John rejoiced because he had received good reports of Gaius, and then in 3 John 5-8 he encourages Gaius to continue with the good work that he was doing. John knew that Gaius' soul was prospering, but perhaps Gaius was in poor health, and possibly he was experiencing other difficulties as well, because John prayed that he might prosper in all things and be in health, just as his soul prospered. This is a good model for us when we seek to encourage others. He isn't saying, "Congratulations Gaius, you're such a great chap and it's all down to you!" Rather, he is letting Gaius know that he is delighted to hear about his good testimony, he is encouraging him to keep going on, and he is caring for the whole person, desiring the best for him. Let's do the same for others. Let's rejoice when we hear about someone doing well, and let's give God thanks for His work in them. Let's be concerned for their spiritual well-being - that their soul is prospering - but let's not forget all the other circumstances that affect them too. We often hear about holistic care these days. John was showing true spiritual "holistic" care for Gaius.

Two words that seem prominent in this letter are “truth” and “love”. John says that he loves Gaius in truth (3 John 1), and that Gaius is walking in the truth (3 John 3-4), and that we should be fellow workers for the truth (3 John 8). John had heard the testimony about Gaius’ love (3 John 6). Gaius seemed to show love in action and truth in action. He is a good example for us to follow. This is also what will make up a healthy church. As we know from Scripture, God is love and God is light (1 John 1:5). If we are to represent God faithfully, we will need to show both love and truth.

I said earlier that Gaius was others-centred. He looked after the needs of travelling preachers, even though he did not previously know them. They were seeking to spread the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, and so Gaius was pleased to be able to support them. Being others-centred will greatly contribute to a healthy church. Many years ago, I saw on a friend’s bookmark three lines, saying “Jesus first, Others second, Yourself last”. The first letter of each of the three lines spelt the word “joy.” You’ve probably seen that before on posters or cards, or that type of thing. It’s one of those comments that have stuck in my mind. To be honest, it’s a challenge - I have to ask myself whether I really do put other people before me. I am only too well aware of my own self-centredness. But, we know that there is truth in those three lines.

When we care about the interests of our Lord Jesus and His people, it does bring joy. When we are entirely self-centred, it tends to lead to misery and bitterness. God did not make us to be self-centred, self-sufficient individuals. We **are** individuals in that everyone is important to God, but God wishes to place us in His family. When we are saved, we become children of God. In his first epistle, the Apostle John says, “Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God, and everyone who loves Him who begot also loves him who is begotten of Him” (1 John 5:1). We are to love our spiritual brothers and sisters. Again in 1 John 3:23 we read, “And this is His commandment: that we should believe on the name of His Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as He gave us commandment.”

As we read on in 3 John, we come across Diotrephes. Diotrephes, unfortunately, was a very self-centred person. We read in verse 9 that Diotrephes loved to have the pre-eminence in the church. He loved to be first. I suppose he wanted to be considered important. What it led to was a very sad state of affairs. He didn’t receive the Apostle John (3 John 9), and he spoke wicked things about him (3 John 10). He even thrust out those who disagreed with his ways (3 John 10). Wanting to be “number one” often leads to these unhappy results. If someone wants to be the most important person, without caring about others, then they may well end up doing similar things to Diotrephes: not receiving those whom they think might threaten their position, seeking to discredit them by spreading malicious gossip, and excluding those that don’t fall in with them. In 3 John 11, John states quite simply that such conduct is evil. “Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good”, he says. He then commends Demetrius. We do not know anything else about Demetrius, but from the context of the earlier verses, Demetrius may have possibly been one of those people that Diotrephes thrust out.

Let’s contrast Diotrephes’ actions with the Apostle Paul’s instructions in his epistle to the Philippians. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul writes, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.” This attitude is the polar opposite of what Diotrephes was doing. Paul says that we should not do things, even what we might think of as Christian or spiritual things, through selfish ambition - that is, to enhance our reputation, make us look good, and make a name for ourselves. We should be looking out for the interests of others, and how we can help them.

Paul states this truth again in 1 Corinthians 12, where he is speaking about spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12:7 we read, “But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to each one for the profit of all.” It might be easy to become proud about our spiritual gifts and use them in selfish ambition and conceit, but Paul reminds us that the point of spiritual gifts is to use them for the profit of all.

Now, Gaius was using what he had for the profit of all. We don’t know what spiritual gifts Gaius had. All we know is that he showed love and practical help to Christians who came across his path. His actions blessed other people, and he is remembered for that - “Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, who have borne witness of your love before the church” (3 John 5-6a). The actions of Diotrephes, on the other hand, harmed other people - he spoke malicious words, and thrust some people out of the church (3 John 10).

All this leads to a sobering conclusion. Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius were all real people living in the first century AD, and they made it onto the pages of Scripture. How dreadful to be immortalised in Scripture like Diotrephes has been! On the other hand, what an encouragement Gaius and Demetrius are to so-called ordinary Christians. These three men show us that our actions and our lives are not irrelevant, and they are not forgotten or ignored by God. If I was to try and think what others might write for my obituary, what might it look like? What kind of legacy would I like to leave? Would I want to be remembered as a Christian like Gaius, or would I want to be remembered as a self-centred, self-important Diotrephes?

John finishes off his short letter by writing that he wants to meet up with Gaius and speak face to face. *"I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink; but I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace to you. Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name"* (3 John 13-14). God saw to it that this letter was preserved to become part of the Bible, the Word of God, and so God uses it for our blessing and for our instruction. We need wisdom to know when to write, and when to speak face to face.

The Bible has many instructions and much guidance about the wise use of words. Proverbs 15:23 tells us, *"A man has joy by the answer of his mouth, and a word spoken in due season, how good it is!"* When someone gives us genuine encouragement in the Lord, how good it is! That is probably part of what the Apostle John wanted to say when he would meet up with Gaius. It is very good to have an encouraging conversation with someone face to face, and it can really help us on our way. A letter has its advantages too, because it is more permanent, and we can return to it and re-read it when we need some encouragement. On the other hand, the copying of letters and forwarding of emails and so on can cause a lot of harm. It is sometimes much better to speak face to face when there is a sensitive matter to discuss, than to send a letter.

I remember learning a valuable lesson about that! I had written an email that I was about to send, and it was about a sensitive matter. This was some years back, and my computer at the time was a bit slow. I was printing out a document at the same time, and this slowed down the computer, so that when I moved the mouse and clicked on the name of the person I wanted to send the email to, the cursor on the screen hadn't moved at the same time, and I ended up sending the email to someone else! Thankfully, no harm was done, but it was an awkward and embarrassing moment for me, and it could have been much more difficult if it had gone to certain other people! Perhaps you have had a similar experience? It taught me to be much more thoughtful and careful about what I write - and to whom I send it!

Now that we've considered 3 John, let's recap to remind ourselves what we have learnt. I'd like to use an approach that I came across in a book I am reading at the moment. The book is called *"Preach the Word"*, (ISBN: 9781581349269) and it's edited by Ryken and Wilson. It's a collection of essays about preaching from God's Word. The first chapter is by David Jackman, and he makes a very helpful point. He explains that all 66 books of the Bible make up one grand message, so a good question we can ask ourselves is what we would have lost if one book of the Bible was missing. Let's use that approach to recap on 3 John. If we had been given a Bible in which 3 John was removed, what teaching would we have missed out on?

We would have missed out on the encouragement available to all so-called ordinary Christians. As I pointed out at the start, we don't know much about Gaius - he does not seem to have been a missionary or a great teacher and preacher. But, he acted in truth and love, and that is something that is open to all of us. Gaius was faithful in his time and his locality, and that was pleasing to God.

We also see from 3 John a wonderful example of pastoral care from John the Apostle and Elder. We considered how he cared for the whole person - he praised Gaius' good deeds, he encouraged him to continue in them, and he showed concern for Gaius' health and life in general. 3 John shows us a practical example of how to encourage a fellow believer in a godly way.

If we did not have 3 John, we might have missed out on a practical example of hospitality. The epistle to the Hebrews reminds us in Hebrews 13:2, *"Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels."* Gaius' example in 3 John gives us a real life example of someone who did not forget to entertain strangers, because he looked after travelling preachers and cared for their needs.

3 John also gives us the sad but instructive example of the self-seeking Diotrephes. Earlier we considered the Apostle Paul's instructions to the Philippians, when he wrote, *"Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others"* (Philippians 2:3-4).

Diotrephes is a real life example of what happens when such instructions are ignored. It's a bit like all the characters we read about in John Bunyan's famous *Pilgrim's Progress*. If we read *Pilgrim's Progress*, we know that we should avoid the advice of Mr. Worldly-Wiseman, and that we should not get off the pathway and get imprisoned by Giant Despair. *Pilgrim's Progress* is an excellent and helpful story, but 3 John is a real letter and Diotrephes was a real person. Let's learn from this and avoid Diotrephes' example at all costs!

What about 3 John 12, *"Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true"*? Would it have mattered if that verse was not in the Bible? Yes, it would have mattered. Why so? Well, because here again is, to us, an otherwise unknown Christian (I expect he would have been well known to Gaius and his contemporaries, of course) but someone whose life was a testimony - and that pleases God. We can see from Gaius, and from Demetrius, that we don't need to be famous, or well-known, or possessors of

spectacular gifts. If we are faithful and lead a consistent Christian life, we will be pleasing God. We will also be helping to make up a healthy church, because a healthy church will consist of spiritually healthy individuals. So, from this short letter of only a few verses, we have gained a wealth of practical instruction. This is the characterising feature of the Word of God - it is *“given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness”* (2 Timothy 3:16).

I trust that this small portion of God’s Word has encouraged you today.

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