

CHRISTIANS COME IN MANY KINDS

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By the Book™ A Chapter by Chapter Bible Study
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Let's Begin

The great Southern Baptist statesman, Hershel Hobbs, once indicated in a sermon that a strange phrase has crept into our vocabulary in recent years—the “born again Christian.” He said the phrase is redundant. It is like saying “dog dog.” If one is born again, then one is a Christian. If one is a Christian in the scriptural sense, one is born again!

We agree with Dr. Hobbs. Nonetheless, there is a sense in which Christians come in many kinds. For example, there are Christians in various denominations of the Christian church. In addition, there is another sense in which Christians differ—they differ in their level of living out the truth. John makes this point clear in this little letter. He describes three different church members with all three displaying different levels of Gospel commitment.

Therefore, as we make our way through third John, let's turn our attention to the outline below as our guide:

- I. Gaius: a Commendable Christian (vv. 1-8)**
- II. Diotrephes: a Cantankerous Christian (vv. 9-10)**
- III. Demetrius: a Consistent Christian (vv. 11-14)**

I. Gaius: a Commendable Christian (vv. 1-8)

While John wrote to a group in his first letter and to a particular family in his second letter, he writes to an individual in the present letter. How is truth lived out in the individual Christian life? Three personalities are brought into particular focus. John begins, “The elder unto the well-beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth. Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth” (vv. 1-2). Writing toward the end of his life, John identifies himself as an “elder.” At times, the term translated “elder” refers simply to maturity in years, and at other times it refers more technically to a church leader. Undoubtedly, John could have both nuances in mind as he wrote to the church concerning these individuals.

The first Christian named is Gaius. “Gaius” was a common name in this period as is “Smith” today. More importantly, John

expresses his love for Gaius as one whom he loves “in the truth.” John displays true Christian fellowship toward Gaius making the truth in Jesus Christ the hub of their personal relationship. Nothing can destroy the family of God for in eternity, all will be one as they worship the Lamb together.

Observe the greeting John gives to Gaius—“I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth.” A modern rendering of this

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phrase might be best captured with a simple, “I hope you are feeling fine.” The term translated “prosper” carries with it the idea of travelling a good road and hence having a good journey. Some attempt to make John into a “health and wealth” preacher. To the contrary, for John (as well as other New Testament authors), material prosperity may very well prove to be a curse on one’s soul. While material wealth is not entirely excluded from John’s thought, he is not particularly interested in Gaius’ economic status. Rather he is concerned that Gaius is thriving physically and spiritually.

John continues, “For I rejoiced greatly, when the brethren came and testified of the truth that is in thee, even as thou walkest in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth” (vv. 3-4). Christian brothers had already given John news of his friend’s spiritual health. The Apostle was pleased to hear of his success in the Lord. He particularly was glad of Gaius’ healthy “walking in the truth,” which, he confesses, grants to him greater joy than anything else he could learn about his fellow believers. Gaius was a convert under John’s ministry. Nothing gives a pastor more sense of joy in ministry than one who comes to faith in Christ due, in part, to his preaching and ministry.

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Even so, John desires to commend Gaius for his faithfulness in practicing Christian hospitality. He writes, “Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name’s sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellow helpers to the truth” (vv. 5-8). In order for the Gospel to be spread successfully in the first century, it remained necessary for churches to accommodate Christian teachers in their homes. Travelling was more expensive in that day than even in this one. Travelling evangelists could not afford to stay in expensive inns. Nor did many of them have other skills which could be used to offset their living requirements. Therefore, hospitality by the churches in supplying room and board for the teachers was a non-negotiable part of successful evangelism. Additionally, hospitality was undoubtedly interwoven into their cultural etiquette (cp. also 1 Pet. 4:9; Rom. 12:13).

Christians must support the work of evangelism and not assume others will take care of the needs (v. 7). Indeed as John makes clear, when believers support spreading the Gospel, they are sharing the work themselves (v. 8). All are not called to go to foreign lands or pack up and move to other states to plant a church. Even so, all are called to support those who are called to the task.

Reflection Connection

How do you know God is not calling you to a foreign land to spread the Gospel? What are you doing to make sure the entire world knows Who Jesus is and what Jesus did to save the world?



II. Diotrophes: a Cantankerous Christian (vv. 9-10)

The second personality John mentions is Diotrophes. His name comes from two Greek words which mean “one fallen from heaven” and “nourished.” Hence, even his name projects negative connotations. According to John, Diotrophes went out of his way to gain celebrity status in the church. He writes, “I wrote unto the church: but Diotrophes, who loveth to have the preeminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church” (vv. 9-10).

First, Diotrophes requires preeminence from men. He was fond of being first. Children race in order to get to the head of the line (sometimes adults do too!). Diotrophes was like a child who wanted his way and would make sure he got it if he could. Sometimes churches are overrun with those who act similarly to Diotrophes. They demand their own personal preferences whether it’s about music, color of carpet, or where to put the flowers in the Worship Center. What pleases them most is equated with what pleases God most. But the Bible clearly teaches Jesus alone must have preeminence (Col. 1:18). Anyone or anything taking precedence over Jesus Christ forfeits the blessings of Almighty God.

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Reflection Connection

Think about whose preeminence should be visible in your church. How may you ensure Christ has preeminence in all things and not someone else?

Second, Diotrophes rejects prophets from God. Stuck in his own selfish world, Diotrophes found himself fighting against God Himself. John wrote he “receives us not.” Diotrophes was so self-obsessed, he rejected the words of the Apostle, and in doing so, he was rejecting the Word of God. John describes his rejection as “prating against us.” The Greek term translated “prating” literally means “to blow bubbles.” His words were empty, filled with only air. But when his words were not received, he flew into a rampage, attempting to fling members out of the church.

III. Demetrius: a Consistent Christian (vv. 11-14)

John chose to name three individuals in the church to serve as models from which believers could learn. Gaius was commended by John as being surrendered to the Lord in everything. He stood out in walking in the truth and having a healthy spiritual life. Almost a complete contrast is Diotrophes who sought his own selfish desires over everyone else. Being the cantankerous fellow he was, Diotrophes even bucked apostolic authority when it did not suit his own preferences. Rather than give an inch, he attempted to have anyone disagreeing with him banished from the fellowship. Needless to say, Diotrophes is not the kind of church member most of us want around!



The third member John singles out as a model is Demetrius. The Apostle profiles him as the *consistent* Christian. He writes, “Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God. Demetrius hath good report of all men, and of the truth itself: yea, and we also bear record; and ye know that our record is true. I had many things to write, but I will not with ink and pen write unto thee: But I trust I shall shortly see thee, and we shall speak face to face. Peace be to thee. Our friends salute thee. Greet the friends by name” (vv. 11-14).

Interestingly, in the first line, John contrasts Diotrephes with Demetrius, “follow not that which is evil [that is, the model of Diotrephes], but that which is good [the model of Demetrius].” The term translated “follow” is the Greek word from which we get another English word “mimic.” John clearly says we are not to mimic the life of Diotrephes; instead we should model our lives after Demetrius. In this sense, Diotrephes is employed by John as a negative example—a model after which believers should never build their faith.

In addition, note the positive report received about Demetrius not only from other church members, but also from *all* men. He had the respect of community leaders whether in or outside the church. Paul told Timothy similarly concerning church leaders, “Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil” (1 Tim. 3:7). No church should have leaders who serve as liabilities to the church’s reputation rather than assets. Such does not mean, of course, that church leaders must have universal approval from all unbelievers in the community. If a preacher, for example, preaches the Bible faithfully, it is only a matter of time until someone somewhere is offended by the message of God’s Word. Instead it does mean that church leaders should be known as men of integrity, honesty, fairness, and sobriety. Demetrius was this kind of man!

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Reflection Connection

Take a few moments and reflect on your own spiritual life. Were John using you as a model, what do you think he might say? Be prayerfully honest as you allow the Holy Spirit you work in your heart.



Golden Greek Nugget

John encouraged the church to be “fellow helpers” to the truth as they journeyed on in the Christian life (v. 8). The Greek term translated “fellow helpers” is *sunergos*, which comes from two other Greek words meaning “with” and “work.” The idea is best expressed as being associates or comrades in action with one another. Believers may have individual purposes but all believers have the same mission—to glorify the Lord Jesus Christ and show Him to the world as Lord and Savior until He comes again.

Wrap Up

Though John wrote to the church, giving them three spiritual models the church could use to excel in their Christian life (one model of which was a negative one), his chief desire was to see them in person and speak to them “face to face.” He knew he could be more effective in ironing out their practical issues if he sat down with their leaders in true Biblical fellowship. Consequently, the blessing of peace could reign once again in their Christian community.