

## ARE YOU A HELP OR A HINDRANCE?

*“Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God” (3 John 11).*

TWO types of Christians exist: those who help the church and those who hinder it. Which are you? We find examples of both kinds in 3 John.

Third John is an epistle. However, it is different from some of the other epistles, such as Romans and Ephesians and Hebrews, which could be thought of as theological treatises written in the form of letters. The words “Jesus” and “Christ” are not even found in this little letter, but “the Name” obviously refers to the name of Jesus our Lord. “Jesus” is the only name by which we can be saved, the name which is above every name, and the name at which every knee will ultimately bow (Acts 4:12; Philippians 2:9, 10).

Third John is a very personal letter,<sup>1</sup> from the heart of one man to the heart of another. Further, as personal letters do, it provides special insight into the minds and lives of both the writer and the recipient. It also gives an intimate view of

several other actors in the drama of church life toward the end of the first century.<sup>2</sup> Let us discover what we can learn from the individuals John named.

We will begin by reading 3 John:

<sup>1</sup>The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. <sup>2</sup>Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers. <sup>3</sup>For I was very glad when brethren came and testified to your truth, that is, how you are walking in truth. <sup>4</sup>I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth.

<sup>5</sup>Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; <sup>6</sup>and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. <sup>7</sup>For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. <sup>8</sup>Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.

<sup>9</sup>I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. <sup>10</sup>For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the church.

<sup>11</sup>Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.

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<sup>1</sup>It is also much like other letters that were written at that time. F. F. Bruce said, “The third Epistle, being addressed by an individual to an individual, approximates even more closely than the second epistle to the regular pattern of letter-writing in the Graeco-Roman world of that day” (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John: Introduction, Exposition and Notes* [N.p.: Pickering & Inglis, 1970; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1986], 146). Most of the epistles are longer than the letters typically written in the first century. (D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992], 232.)

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<sup>2</sup>Especially, the epistle gives us insight into the church in the province of Asia, where the apostle John worked.

<sup>12</sup>Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true.

<sup>13</sup>I had many things to write to you, but I am not willing to write them to you with pen and ink; <sup>14</sup>but I hope to see you shortly, and we will speak face to face.

Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.

Two men were trying to ride a tandem bicycle (a “bicycle built for two”) up a steep hill. It required strenuous pedaling. By the time they got to the top, they were exhausted. One said, “That was hard work! I was afraid we were never going to make it!” The other replied, “Yes, and if I hadn’t kept the brakes on all the way, we might have slipped back down the hill!”

Probably, every congregation of the Lord’s church has helpers (Christians who are pedaling to get uphill) as well as hindrances (those who keep applying the brakes). From 3 John, let us consider examples of both types of church members.

## CHRISTIANS WHO AID IN THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

John’s epistle speaks of several kinds of Christians who aided in the accomplishment of the Lord’s work.

### Loving Leaders

The writer of the letter identified himself as “the elder”: “The elder to the beloved Gaius” (3 John 1). There are good reasons to believe that he was, in fact, John the apostle. The first Christian mentioned in this epistle, then, is the apostle John, who wrote the letter to a brother in Christ. Considering John’s character leads to the conclusion that accomplishing the work of the church requires loving leaders.

What connection did he have to the work? The answer to that question requires us to know what the work was. John was concerned about traveling evangelists, or missionaries. In order for them to accomplish their task, they had to be accepted and supported by individuals and churches.<sup>3</sup> In the situation depicted in 3 John,

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<sup>3</sup>This practice was carried out as congregations selected and ordained missionaries, sending them out with the means to support themselves for the first part of the journey. Established congregations along the way would receive these

Gaius had been accepting and helping such men; but Diotrephes had rejected them. What was John’s role in correcting this situation? He was a leader; he led by urging, appreciating, teaching, and motivating—and by promising corrective discipline (3 John 10). As a leader, he had a responsibility to make sure that the job was done.

How did he go about fulfilling his responsibility? What stands out about his leadership in the text of 3 John is love:

1. He loved Gaius (3 John 1).

2. His love led him to want the best for Gaius—namely, that Gaius might prosper in every way, just as his soul prospered (3 John 2).

3. His love caused him to focus on the spiritual welfare of others. Nothing pleased him more than to know that those for whom he felt responsible were “walking in truth” (3 John 3; see v. 4).

4. However, his love did not lead him to excuse the sin of Diotrephes. He spoke openly of Diotrephes’ sin and said that he would deal with him when he came (3 John 9, 10). He took his leadership, his authority, seriously—not for his own sake, but for the sake of the church.

Even so, if the work of the church today is to be accomplished—if souls are to be saved and the church is to be built up—the church must have loving leaders. Such men will take their responsibility seriously, will encourage members to “walk in the truth,” and will love them for their faithfulness. They will also correct those who are like Diotrephes.

### Supportive Saints

The second Christian mentioned in 3 John is Gaius.<sup>4</sup> From a consideration of his character, we conclude that the accomplishment of the Lord’s work requires supportive saints.

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brethren, care for them for a time, and then supply their needs for the next part of their travels. (Bruce, 149; J. W. Roberts, *The Letters of John*, The Living Word Commentary [Austin, Tex.: R. B. Sweet Co., 1968], 175.)

<sup>4</sup>Since John included Gaius among his “children,” John may have converted him. (Roberts, 173.) Another possibility is that “Gaius is one of many younger fellow-believers for whom [John] feels a fatherly concern and affection” (Bruce, 149). There are three other Gaiuses mentioned in the New Testament (Acts 19:29; Acts 20:4; Romans 16:23), but there is no reason to believe that this Gaius is to be identified with any of the others. Gaius was a common name in the first-century Roman world. (Bruce, 147.)

Notice what John said first to this brother: “Beloved, I pray that in all respects you may prosper and be in good health, just as your soul prospers” (3 John 2).<sup>5</sup> Would you like for someone to pray that you might prosper as your soul prospers? In some cases, that would be like praying that the individuals might go bankrupt or get sick and die; for they are bankrupt spiritually, and their souls are on their deathbeds! Instead of allowing ourselves to be in this position, let us strive to be spiritually healthy, so that someone could say of us what John said of Gaius! His soul was healthy! What were the characteristics of his spiritual health?

Perhaps John’s words suggest that Gaius’ life showed abundant evidence of Christian virtues, such as love, kindness, patience, and goodness. However, there are some facts we can know for sure about Gaius:

*One fact is that his life was a life of truth:* John said that brethren testified of his truth and added that Gaius was “walking in truth” (3 John 3). The idea is that he obeyed the truth. His life was congruent with his beliefs; he lived what he believed.

*In addition, Gaius’ life was a life of service.* Notice especially what John said about his helping others:

Beloved, you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; and they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. For they went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth (3 John 5–8).

Who were the brethren mentioned in verse 5? Those whom Gaius helped were men who traveled from one place to another, preaching the Word and carrying out the apostles’ instructions.

What did Gaius do for them? He provided help to them<sup>6</sup>—even to strangers, brethren whom he did not already know. He served these traveling evangelists while they were in his own area.

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<sup>5</sup>J. W. Roberts said concerning this verse, “Thus John asserts his confidence that Gaius is doing fine in a spiritual way and expresses the hope that in the other respects named he may do equally as well” (Roberts, 172).

<sup>6</sup>The RSV translates verse 5, “It is a loyal thing you do when you render any service to the brethren, especially to strangers.”

In helping them, he was *hospitable* for the sake of the gospel.<sup>7</sup>

Gaius was urged to send these Christian brothers on their way, and we may assume that he did so. The expression “send them on their way” suggests that he helped to pay their expenses as they traveled from his house to the next stop on their journey.<sup>8</sup> He was *liberal* in giving, willing to part with his money to help spread the gospel.

In other words, he showed love to them; then they testified about his love before the congregation (3 John 6). His love was demonstrated by the way he helped his visitors. Love left unexpressed can hardly be called love. He was *loving*.

The same sort of Christians are needed in the church today. Such disciples are not necessarily those who are going out to teach and preach the Word or to establish churches in difficult areas of the world. Instead, they include the people who are supporting such workers—supporting them financially, supporting them emotionally, and supporting them personally. They are getting involved in other ways, as Gaius did by opening his home to them. The church needs supportive saints who are hospitable, liberal, and loving.

### Self-Sacrificing Soldiers

*Evangelists.* Third, the epistle implies the existence of a group of men who are preachers or missionaries. From them we can learn that, if the work of the church is to be done, self-sacrificing soldiers are needed. John said, “They went out for the sake of the Name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles. Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth” (3 John 7, 8).

What do we learn about these men?

- (1) They remembered to be grateful for what was done for them and to praise those who had helped them. John told Gaius, “They have testified to your love before the church” (3 John 6).
- (2) Their singular aim was to serve God;

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<sup>7</sup>The New Testament emphasizes the need for Christians to be hospitable. See Romans 12:13; Hebrews 13:2; 1 Peter 4:9; 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8; 1 Timothy 5:10.

<sup>8</sup>The verb “send” implies support or being helped on one’s way. Compare Acts 15:3; Romans 15:24; 1 Corinthians 16:6, 11; 2 Corinthians 1:16. (Roberts, 175.)

they “went out for the sake of the Name” (3 John 7).

- (3) They were willing to make sacrifices for the Lord; they went out “accepting nothing from the Gentiles” (3 John 7).

These soldiers of Christ made financial sacrifices. It takes considerable faith for one to set out under such circumstances—having no guarantee of support, depending on the brethren in each place for hospitality and gifts, and accepting no help from unbelievers.<sup>9</sup> I doubt that I would have been willing to set out under such circumstances. Frequently (and not just in the case of preachers or missionaries), wholehearted service to God requires financial sacrifices.

However, the main idea we want to notice is that these men were leading the advance of the Lord’s kingdom. They were like the “front line soldiers” in God’s army. They were devoting their whole lives to spreading the kingdom. We must have men like these in the church: preachers and missionaries whose primary aim in life is to proclaim the Word. Not everyone has to do such work, but some must be willing to answer the call to dedicate themselves to a life of preaching the gospel.

When Christians are involved in this kind of work, their efforts must be valued. They need to be supported and encouraged, and they need to be allowed to concentrate on their work of evangelism. John encouraged Gaius to support these brethren.

1. He said that evangelists should be sent on their way “in a manner worthy of God” (3 John 6). Does that advice suggest that supporters should not try to see how little they can pay their missionaries, how cheaply they can purchase their work?

2. He also encouraged their support by saying that they went out “accepting nothing from the Gentiles” (3 John 7). Therefore, he urged, “we ought to support such men” (3 John 8); their sacrifice deserves our sacrifices, our liberal giving.

3. He then added that, when we support these workers, we become “fellow workers with

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<sup>9</sup>Roberts pointed out that this principle was in accord with Paul’s methods. See Acts 18:3; 20:34; 1 Corinthians 9:6–18; 2 Corinthians 11:7–11; Philippians 4:14–19; 1 Thessalonians 2:9. (Ibid., 175–76.) Compare Matthew 10:9–15.

the truth” (3 John 8).<sup>10</sup> In other words, we share in their work. Whatever they accomplish, we accomplish.

Regarding verse 11, commentators agree that “what is evil” refers back to Diotrephes and “what is good” refers to Demetrius. The message in this verse is “Do not be like Diotrephes; rather, be like Demetrius, whom I will now describe.”<sup>11</sup>

*Demetrius.* The full-time workers John described probably included Demetrius: “Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself; and we add our testimony, and you know that our testimony is true” (3 John 12).

Who was Demetrius? Nothing is known about him except what John wrote in this epistle. He likely was the person who was carrying the letter for John. Probably, too, he belonged in the category of workers John had just described.

Look at the testimony borne to his character: “Everyone” testified to his faithfulness; “the truth itself” testified to his work, in the sense that he lived according to the truth. John also testified to his good character. Every Christian should strive to live in such a way that the same kinds of things could be said about him or her.

## CHRISTIANS WHO HINDER THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

In speaking of Diotrephes, the epistle describes a second type of Christian—one who does not help in accomplishing the work, but somehow hinders it.

### What Diotrephes Did

What did he do that was wrong? He did not receive the self-sacrificing soldiers: “He himself does not receive the brethren” (3 John 10). Besides that, he stopped others from welcoming them, going so far as to put them out of the church, disfellowshipping them.

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<sup>10</sup>“Paul used the word ‘fellow-worker’ to describe those who accompanied and worked with him on his preaching journeys (Rom. 16:3, 9; Phil. 2:25; 4:3)” (Mike Vestal, “A Greeting and a Commendation,” *Denton Lectures* [1987], 283). See Romans 16:9, 21; Philemon 24. Those who share in the preaching of the gospel by supporting the preacher share in the fruit which is borne by the preacher’s work (Philippians 1:5; 4:10–18). The necessity of supporting preachers/missionaries was emphasized by Paul in Romans 10:15a: “How will they preach unless they are sent?”

<sup>11</sup>Based on Bruce, 154.



He even refused to accept the authority of John, the apostle. John had written a letter to the church over which Diotrephes exercised leadership (3 John 9a), but Diotrephes had disregarded it. There is no indication that that letter was either 1 or 2 John. Rather, it was probably a letter that related to the encouragement and support of the traveling evangelists.<sup>12</sup> John said concerning Diotrephes, “(He) does not accept what we say. . . . accusing us with wicked words” (3 John 9, 10). Perhaps he had his own version of the gospel. He may have disagreed with something John taught. Maybe there was some specific truth he did not believe. He may have been a false teacher.<sup>13</sup> In any case, he refused to accept John’s authority.

### Why Diotrephes Did It

Why did Diotrephes refuse to accept the traveling evangelists, and why did he reject John’s authority? John explained: He “loves to be first among them” (3 John 9b). (The KJV says, “He loveth to have the preeminence.”) Diotrephes was an empire-builder,<sup>14</sup> and the local congregation was his empire. He did not want anyone, whether John the apostle or the traveling evangelists, to interfere with his direction of the congregation or to undermine his authority.

Are there men like that today? I have seen them—little men who are empire-builders, who want to be first. Their aim is to rule over a congregation rather than to serve it, and they want to achieve this without any interference from members within the congregation or from preachers or missionaries outside the congregation.

Most, if not all, of local church problems are the result of the “Diotrephes sin-drome”<sup>15</sup>—the desire to be “first,” the lust for power. Most church problems are really about who is in charge, who is going to have the power. Probably, there is at least a little bit of Diotrephes in each of us; the desire for preeminence is part of the human

condition. If so, it is a desire we must fight—especially in the church. Our aim must be to follow Jesus’ example; He said,

And whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many (Mark 10:44, 45).

If our goal is “to be first,” to be a master rather than a servant, then the work of the church will be impeded. We need to remember this saying: “It is amazing how much good one can do if he does not care who gets the credit.”

## OTHERS WHO HINDER THE WORK OF THE CHURCH

Of course, other Christians can have a negative effect on the work of the church:

(1) Those who preach false teaching, or who do not preach the gospel as it is written, damage the church.

(2) Those who continue in sin bring reproach upon the church.

(3) Those who refuse to contribute to the church—who do not give of their presence, their time, their money, or their talents to the church—inhibit the growth of the church.

(4) Those who will not follow the leadership of the elders are a detriment to the church. Sometimes the problem with the church is not poor leadership; it is poor “follower-ship.”

(5) Those who cause dissension in the church by criticizing without cause prevent the church from accomplishing its mission.

(6) Those who oppose anything that might be helpful for causing the church to grow are stunting the growth of the church. They are like the man who said, “I’ve been a member of this church for fifty years. I’ve seen a lot of changes during that time, and I’ve been against every one of them.”

## CONCLUSION

When I was in the ninth grade, I was the quarterback on a junior high football team in Moore, Oklahoma. We had a fiery little coach named Jack Frost. One day, during practice, I was supposed to lead the blocking. Somehow, I made an error in executing the play. I accidentally got in front of the ball carrier and knocked

<sup>12</sup>Roberts, 177.

<sup>13</sup>Roberts said, “Diotrephes may have opposed the reception of John’s messengers for doctrinal reasons, leaning to the position of the false teachers (1 John 2:18ff.; 4:1ff.) rather than to that of the elder” (Ibid.).

<sup>14</sup>In biblical terms, he “was trying to be a lord over God’s heritage, which the apostle Peter condemned (1 Pet. 5:3)” (W. Dan Carter, “A Rebuke and a Compliment,” *Denton Lectures* [1987], 290).

<sup>15</sup>This pun refers to a “syndrome,” an assortment of symptoms indicating a disease or abnormal condition.

him down. Coach Frost yelled at me, “Roper, if you can’t block, at least get out of the way!”

His admonition is good advice for some of those who are hindering the work of the church. We want to say to them, “If you cannot block—that is, if you cannot or will not help in clearing the way for the work of the church—at least get out of the way!” We must be careful not to obstruct the work of the church. We would not want to keep others from doing what they can do. Let us not keep the church from accomplishing what it is designed to accomplish.

Which are you: Are you a loving leader, a

supportive saint, or perhaps a self-sacrificing soldier? Are you, instead, like Diotrephes—one who keeps the church from succeeding or spoils the work of the church in some other way? Are you one who helps or one who hinders, one who builds up the church or one who tears it down? Do you aid and assist and promote the work of the church, or do you oppose it? Think about it.

If you have kept the church from succeeding because of your sinful life, now is the time to make it right.

Coy Roper

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