



## “Love Not Only in Word, but in Deed and Truth” (1 John 3:18)

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I had a colleague several years ago (he has now retired) who had a disarming way of raising serious, complicated problems in the middle of casual conversations. For example, he once turned to me during a walk across campus and asked, “So, why is 3 John even in the Bible?” I can no longer remember my answer, but even after so many years, I have not forgotten his question. Because readers of this issue may have a similar reaction to reading 3 John, the present article offers some reflections on 3 John, and especially on the immense value that this small letter has for Christian faith and life.

Third John is one of few books of the New Testament that was slow to receive wide distribution and canonical status. It was not, for instance, among the texts of Scripture used by Irenaeus in the second century.<sup>1</sup> Even in the fourth century, when Athanasius of Alexandria and Gregory of Nazianzus included 3 John in their lists of authorized Scripture, John Chrysostom does not seem to have used

<sup>1</sup> For discussion of some of the issues related to the inclusion of 3 John in the canonical New Testament, see Bruce Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament: Its Origin, Development and Significance* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1997), especially 138, 212–14, as well as Charles E. Hill, *The Johannine Corpus in the Early Church* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 460, 463–64, 471.

*At first glance, the epistle of 3 John seems to have little connection to the first two, or much applicability to modern Christians. But in fact, 3 John is a practical application of the theoretical understandings of 1 and 2 John, especially in its concern for living out the testimony to Christ that is the core of the Johannine theology.*

the book as Scripture, probably because it was excluded from the Syriac *Peshitta*, which influenced what was read in Antioch when Chrysostom was there.<sup>2</sup> Third John was not as quick to be seen as canonical as other New Testament books. Pursuing this issue is important and interesting, and worthy of careful attention. I have a different focus in the present essay, though, because I do not think this is the concern that animated my colleague's question. He was not asking a historical question about the development of the canonical Scripture. He was asking, I think, a personal question: What does 3 John have to say to anyone beyond its original recipient? What does it have to say, that is, to Christian believers today? Third John seems to have a very specific purpose, confined to a very specific context. It seems to have little to offer to posterity.

To tell the truth, 3 John seems to have little relevance even to its own day. The first two letters of John seem infinitely more important, in that they articulate one side of a struggle over Christology that has separated the Johannine community. The contours of that struggle are now only barely visible, but a few things can be said tentatively. Some members of the community do not believe that Jesus truly became human, or that he truly "became flesh" (John 1:14). That Jesus was God, they seem to accept; that he was human, they seem to reject.<sup>3</sup> This disagreement seems to have led to a schism, judging from the statement that says:

They went out from us, but they did not belong to us; for if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us. But by going out they made it plain that none of them belongs to us. (1 John 2:19)

The first and second letters of John address this Christological issue, as well as the problems presented by the resulting schism. These are complicated matters, addressed in a complicated fashion.

Third John seems to be animated by an entirely separate set of circumstances, totally unrelated to the christological and ecclesiological problems that lie behind 1 and 2 John. Some scholars have tried to connect 3 John to 1 and 2 John in various ways, but their efforts are hard to confirm. Third John is written by the otherwise anonymous elder to an otherwise unknown figure named Gaius, in order to ask Gaius to support the traveling emissaries of the elder (1–2, 12). Mention is also made of a certain Diotrephes (9–10). Where Gaius is praised for his previous support of missionaries, Diotrephes is unsupportive and receives censure. Third John tells us nothing more about the circumstances out of which it arose. To repeat what

<sup>2</sup> See Metzger, *The Canon of the New Testament*, 212–14, for Athanasius, Gregory, and Chrysostom.

<sup>3</sup> Both 1 and 2 John stress the importance of believing that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh as in 1 John 4:2, "By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God," and 2 John 7, "Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist!" Some form of Docetism most likely motivates the secessionists. A more nuanced approach is offered by M. de Boer, who argues that the secessionists reject only that Jesus's death matters for our salvation. See Martinus de Boer, "The Death of Jesus Christ and His Coming in the Flesh (1 John 4:2)," *Novum Testamentum* 33, no. 4 (1991): 326–46.

was said above, not only does it seem to have little to say in our time; it seems to have said little to its original recipient.<sup>4</sup>

But this is only on the level of appearances, and Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, “Do not judge by appearances” (7:24). If we look beyond appearances, we can recognize that 3 John articulates a powerful message in the Johannine tradition. To see how this is so, we first need to address questions of form. In terms of genre, 3 John is a letter of reference or commendation. Letters of reference were common in antiquity. When people traveled to new towns, or when they sought help from an unknown party, it was necessary to have a letter of reference to secure assistance.<sup>5</sup> Such letters are mentioned in several places in the book of Acts, for example, in order to introduce and vouch personally for a traveler for the purpose of securing help for that traveler. The request for help is often couched, not as a gift for the traveler only, but more especially for the recommender. One such letter from Cicero reads as follows:

To Publius Caesius. I most earnestly recommend to your favour my very intimate friend Publius Messienus, a Roman knight, who is distinguished by every valuable endowment. I entreat you, by the double ties of that love which I enjoy with you and your father, to protect him both in his fame and his fortunes. Be assured you will in this way win the affection of a man highly deserving of your friendship, as well as confer a most acceptable obligation upon myself. Farewell. (*Ep.* 13.76)<sup>6</sup>

By their very nature, letters of reference are confined to particular circumstances, and this very particularity makes them difficult to use for teaching and preaching. Indeed, all letters, as long as they are real letters emanating from real circumstances, share this dilemma. The problem of particularity has regularly been raised in the study of the *Corpus Paulinum*. All of Paul’s letters are addressed to specific people or congregations. They are all “particular.” As the first Christians circulated these letters in the wake of Paul’s ministry, especially to readers distant from Paul’s original congregations, certain manuscripts seem to have been modified in order to remove their original destinations, thereby opening the letters to a broader readership. For example, the phrase “in Rome” has been deleted from the Letter to the Romans in verses 1:7 and 1:15 in some manuscripts (G, Origen), effectively giving the letter a universal audience. Excising two words was all it took to transform a letter addressed specifically to the Romans into a letter written for the whole world.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Attempts have been made to connect the missionary activity of 3 John to the debates and schism that animate 1 and 2 John, but they are unsuccessful. See John Painter, *1, 2, and 3 John*, Sacra Pagina (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2002), 364–65.

<sup>5</sup> For discussion, see Stanley Stowers, *Letter Writing in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986), 153–65.

<sup>6</sup> The translation is from Stowers, *Letter Writing*, 159.

<sup>7</sup> See the classic essay by Nils Dahl, “The Particularity of the Pauline Epistle as a Problem in the Ancient Church” in *Neotestamentica Et Patristica: Eine Freundesgabe, Herrn Professor Dr. Oscar Cullmann Zu Seinem*

The problem of particularity is especially pronounced for something as occasional as a letter of reference, and this problem has followed the Letter to Philemon from antiquity to the present. Philemon, after all, is also a letter of reference, written by Paul to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus.<sup>8</sup> Even in antiquity, this made it difficult for preachers to use the letter with kerygmatic profit. John Chrysostom writes, for example:

But because some say that it was superfluous that this Epistle should be included, since [Paul] is making a request about a small matter in behalf of one man, let them learn who make these objections that they are themselves deserving of very many censures.<sup>9</sup>

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The complaints of Chrysostom's congregation continue today, and commentators on Philemon regularly take time to explain the letter's ongoing value for readers other than Philemon. The way in which N. T. Wright comments on this matter has special relevance for our present interest in 3 John.<sup>10</sup> If the Letter to Philemon seems to have very little explicit theological depth, Wright draws its implicit theological wealth to the surface by reading Philemon in the light of other Pauline texts, especially 2 Corinthians 5:16–21. Second Corinthians 5:16 announces, for example, that "from now on . . . we regard no one from a human point of view," signaling a change in perspective exactly like the one that Paul urges in Philemon (11, 16). The most significant connection between 2 Corinthians 5 and Philemon is the notice that God has reconciled human beings to God "through Christ" (2 Cor 5:18) and has transmitted the ministry of reconciliation onto Christian believers. Paul writes:

All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us. (5:18–20)

60. *Geburstag Überreicht* (Leiden: Brill, 1962), 267–68.

<sup>8</sup> Exactly how Philemon operates depends on the circumstances one posits for the letter. Was Paul asking for Onesimus to be freed from slavery? Was he asking for him merely to be forgiven for some wrong he had committed? The matter is not entirely clear.

<sup>9</sup> John Chrysostom, *Homilies on Philemon*, 1 (slightly modified).

<sup>10</sup> See N. T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 1986), 168.



This ministry of reconciliation is precisely the thing Paul actualizes in his dealing with Philemon, because if Christ is the one through whom human beings are personally reconciled to God, then Paul is the one in whose person Philemon is reconciled to Onesimus. The Letter to Philemon, read from the perspective of Wright, represents a practical application of Pauline theology.

Third John relates to the other documents of the Johannine corpus in precisely the same way. It represents a practical application of what is elsewhere expressed theoretically. Key Johannine terms like *truth* and *testify/testimony* are as significant in 3 John as they are in the Fourth Gospel and in 1 and 2 John. This not only secures the Johannine quality of the letter and shows its natural fit within the Johannine corpus but also shows how this letter articulates one of the more surprising, yet characteristic, expressions of Johannine theology. According to 1 John, it is not enough to know the truth; one must also “do the truth” (1 John 1:6; John 3:21). Similarly, 1 John 3:18 urges, “Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth (or “reality”: *alêtheia*) and action (*ergô*).” The practical application of these admonitions appears in 3 John, when the elder urges Gaius to invite true teachers into his church in order to share in the truth and so be a “co-worker” (*synergos*) in the truth (*alêtheia*; 3 John 8). No less than Philemon in the case of Paul, 3 John represents the practical application of the Johannine theological vision.

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Much more can be said on the way in which 3 John represents what it means to live out the teaching of the Johannine tradition. The central point of 3 John is to urge Gaius to accept those whom the elder has sent out, and to condemn Diotrephes for refusing to accept them. The demand to receive those who are sent out is not a casual concern in the gospel tradition. It is a key way in which Jesus defines his relation to the Father. Jesus regularly refers to the Father, for instance, solely as “the one who sent me” (John 7:28; 8:26, 29). Furthermore, Jesus defines his work as doing nothing more than accomplishing the will of the one who sent him. He says to his disciples, for instance, “My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work” (John 4:34).<sup>11</sup> For this reason, those who do not honor Jesus do not honor his Father either, as when Jesus says,

Anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him. Very truly, I tell you, anyone who hears my word and believes

<sup>11</sup> The point is well made in Margaret Mitchell, “‘Diotrephes Does Not Receive Us’: The Lexicographical and Social Context of 3 John 9–10,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117, no. 2 (1998), 299–320.

him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life. (John 5:23–24)

This same authority is transmitted to the disciples, when Jesus sends them out. He says, "I sent you to reap that for which you did not labor. Others have labored, and you have entered into their labor" (4:38). Again, a little later, Jesus says, "Very truly, I tell you, whoever receives one whom I send receives me; and whoever receives me receives him who sent me" (13:20). The elder has sent people out in Jesus's name. When they are received, Jesus is received in their person. When they are rejected, Jesus is rejected.

Attention to the term *testimony* opens up even greater space for exploration in this regard. The term *testimony* (*martyria*) is significant in 3 John, appearing prominently and repeatedly in verses 3, 5, and 6, as well as twice in verse 12. The fellow believers are testifying to the quality of the faith of Gaius and Demetrius. But it is interesting that this testimony comes in both the opening and the closing verses of the letter.

The opening and closing sections of all the texts in the Johannine orbit, except 2 John, prominently mention testimony. The Gospel of John begins by referring repeatedly to the testimony of John the Baptist, first in the prologue (1:7–8). But most important, the very first line and the very last line in the narrative of the Gospel mention testimony. The narrative of the Gospel opens by saying, "This is the testimony (*martyria*) given by John . . ." (1:19). The final lines of the Gospel return to this term by underscoring the testimony of the Beloved Disciple: "This is the disciple who testifies (*martyrôn*) to these things . . . , and we know that his testimony (*martyria*) is true (*alêthês*)" (21:24). The pattern of the Fourth Gospel is continued in 1 John. First John opens by referring to the testimony of the author to what has been seen and heard (1:2), and then the letter winds to its close by saying in 5:11, "And this is the testimony (*martyria*): God gave us eternal life, and this life is in his Son." Second John does not follow this pattern, but the book of Revelation does. Revelation 1:1–2 says, "The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place; he made it known by sending his angel to his servant John, who *testified* to the word of God and to the *testimony* of Jesus Christ, even to all that he saw." The final chapter of Revelation returns to the topic of testimony when it says in its second-to-last verse, "The one who *testifies* to these things says, 'Surely I am coming soon'" (22:20). When 3 John also emphasizes the importance of testimony, and when it refers to testimony in its opening and closing verses (3, 5, 6, 12), it participates in a broader theme in the Johannine literature. There is even a close verbal parallel in 3 John to the final line in the Fourth Gospel. The Gospel refers in its final line (21:24) to the testimony of the Beloved Disciple and announces, "We know (*oidamen*) that his testimony (*martyria*) is true (*alêthês*)," and 3 John 12 refers to its support for Demetrius by saying, "We also *testify* for him, and you know (*oidas*) that our testimony (*martyria*) is true (*alêthês*)." Once one accounts for the changes in person of the verb,

the statements seem evocative of one another, especially because of the common reliance on the terms *know*, *testimony*, and *true*.<sup>12</sup>

This stress on testimony from beginning to end in 3 John not only imitates the structure of the Gospel of John, but also tells us something about the relationship between being sent in the name of Jesus and the importance of testimony to the truth of a messenger. An anonymous “we” testifies in John 21:24 that they know that the message of the Gospel is “true.” A similar “we” represented by the elder and his associates testifies to the value of Demetrius so that Gaius will accept him. Third John, in other words, continues the testimony of the Fourth Gospel, and this testimony is an essential quality of being “sent out” in both books. The Samaritan woman in John 4 provides a valuable example. After she speaks to Jesus, she runs to tell the rest of her town about his teaching, and we read in John 4:39, “Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the woman’s *testimony* (*martyria*), ‘He told me everything I have ever done.’” Even more directly, when the disciples themselves are sent out, they are sent out precisely in order to testify. Jesus tells them (15:27), “You also are to *testify* because you have been with me from the beginning.”

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When the elder asks Gaius to receive the one whom he has sent, and he connects this sending to his own testimony about the quality of Demetrius (3 John 12), he participates in a complex relationship of sending and testifying that has its roots in the Gospel of John. When the elder sends Demetrius, he sends him in the same way that Jesus has sent the disciples, and in the same way that the Father has sent Jesus into the world. This chain of sending continues in the ministry of Demetrius. This is what gives 3 John its enduring value. In the same way that Philemon serves as a model for Christians to participate in the work of reconciliation that Christ has begun, and to seek ways to reconcile people to one another and to God

<sup>12</sup> A similar device connects the end of 3 John to the close of the Gospel. The Gospel of John draws to a close by saying in 20:30–31, “Jesus did many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book; but these [things] (*tauta*) are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.” Several key terms and phrases in this passage from John find a corollary in a similar statement near the close of 1 John (5:13), “I write these things (*tauta*) to you who believe in the name of the Son of God, so that you may know that you have eternal life.” Both texts refer to “these things” which are “written,” and both texts connect “belief” in the “Son of God” to “having” either “life” or “eternal life.” Third John 13 has a similar resonance, though in a slightly more muted form. Like the phrase in John 20, it apologizes for not writing more when it says, “I have much more to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink.” The Fourth Gospel and 1 John not only open with prologues that resemble one another, but they draw near to their conclusions with summary statements that resemble one another. Third John seems to share in this relationship, at least as it relates to the closing formula.

as Christ did, so 3 John serves as a model for providing hospitality to those who are sent in the name of Christ. More to the point, 3 John provides a practical application of what 1 John commands. First John 3:18 urges, "Let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth (*alêtheia*) and action (*ergô*)." The practical application of these admonitions appears in 3 John, when the elder urges Gaius to invite true teachers into his church in order to share in the truth and so be a "co-worker" (*synergos*) in the truth (*alêtheia*; 3 John 8). Third John provides a living expression of what the other Johannine texts demand. ⊕

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