

Rebuilding the Scene of 3 John

Imagine a house church located some distance from John's primary ministry. It is in the grips of the theological struggle described in 1 John and confronted in 2 John. John himself once wrote to the church, but an influential man named Diotrephes rejected his letter (3 John 9)! John then sent emissaries to the church, but Diotrephes stepped forward and refused to acknowledge the traveling ministers (v. 10). He even repudiated John publicly (v. 9), spreading rumors about his character (v. 10). In fact, Diotrephes forcefully stopped anyone who showed sympathy to the visitors or tried to speak with them. "Anyone who sides with these men from John," Diotrephes threatened, "gets thrown out with them" (cf. v. 10).

The missionaries found a courageous host, however, in a man named Gaius. We cannot tell if Gaius belonged to Diotrephes's house church or if he lived some distance from it. Perhaps he was a leader of another house church located nearby. Clearly Gaius knows Diotrephes, but he does not feel threatened by that man's power. It was Gaius's habit to offer hospitality to traveling Christians and help finance their journeys (vv. 5–6). Thus he not only gave these emissaries from John rest and refreshment, but sent them "on their way" (v. 6)—that is, gave them money—and they returned to John with their report about the rebellion of Diotrephes's church and about Gaius's faithfulness (v. 3).

What should John do in response? He wants to visit the church personally but cannot at the present (v. 14). Yet he knows that he must shore up the true believers and encourage their faithfulness—people like Gaius, who still walk in the truth, whom he calls "friends" (v. 5), and whom he loves dearly (v. 1). He must also keep a foothold in the congregation. So John plans a strategy. In verses 5–8 he commends Gaius for his hospitality and encourages him to continue. The practical side of this is clear: When John himself comes for a visit, he will need allies who stand for Christ and against Diotrephes. Gaius will be one of those allies.

It is significant that John does not ask Gaius to intervene in the controversy by confronting Diotrephes himself. Christians are called to different roles, and Gaius has done enough if he stands firm for Jesus Christ and provides John and his couriers an entrée into the community.

John therefore writes this letter in anticipation of his upcoming visit. Verse 12 introduces the courier of the letter, a Christian named Demetrius. No doubt, John assumes, the hospitality and financial support shown to other Christian travelers will be extended to Demetrius, who is well known by the Johannine community and a personal friend of John himself

— The NIV Application Commentary: Letters of John