

ST ARMANDS KEY LUTHERAN CHURCH
SARASOTA, FLORIDA

COME, JOIN THE CONVERSATION!
ON
THE EPISTLES OF JOHN

Lesson Plan for Thursday – May 1, 2014

FINAL CONVERSATION #12 – “III JOHN”

Our objectives for this session:

- to share ideas, attitudes, and experiences relating to the message proclaimed by John; and, in doing so, strengthen our SAKLC fellowship;
- to re-clarify the Gnostic heresy which was a major factor in prompting the writing of The Epistles of John;
- to become acquainted with Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius;
- to examine the role of ‘Hospitality’ among Christian believers, past and present;
- to recognize that conflict has a long history in the Christian Church, and to explore ways in which it can be managed most effectively;
- and, at this concluding session, to candidly evaluate both the strengths and weaknesses of CONVERSATIONS as you experienced it over the past study year.

OPENING PASTORAL PRAYER and SHARING GOD’S PEACE

Facilitator’s Overview:

This concluding letter in the collection of *John’s Epistles* is written to a leader in an unspecified church. The leader’s name is *Gaius*, a common name during that time. The situation suggested by the letter suggests that the church is being regularly visited by itinerant preachers or prophets, some of whom are seeking to preach/teach an understanding of Christianity different from that proclaimed by the Apostle John.

In the church there are two attitudes towards such visitors. One is to give them hospitality and to send them on their way rejoicing. The other is not to welcome them. Perhaps behind the two attitudes lies a different evaluation of the settled leadership in the church. Some local leaders are happy to share their teaching authority with visiting “charismatics” or prophets, while others think the time has come to discourage the itinerants and emphasize the God-given nature of the settled leadership. Obviously at this point in history, the days of the apostles are ended, or nearly so, and the church is in a period of transition.

It is important to once again recall that in each of John's epistles there has been concern for:

- putting a stop to heretical teachings about Christology
- strengthening in practical ways the faith of readers/hearers
- promoting more faithful discipleship in the name of Jesus Christ to counteract the serious ethical problems that existed within the church & society.

In the early church the major theological distinction between John and his opponents centered on the nature of Jesus Christ ("**Christology**"). John's rivals, while accepting "*the idea of Christ*" were casting severe doubts on whether Jesus was really the *incarnation* of God; these heretics doubted (*some flatly denied*) that Christ really took on human flesh and blood.

Today we have given this Gnostic-based heresy the term "**DOCETISM**" (*from Greek verb 'dokein' "to seem, to appear"*) Docetists were strongly influenced by an element of Greek philosophy, which teaches a "**dualism**" of being:

- flesh (*and anything that pertains to it*) is bad
- spirit (*and anything that pertains to it*) is good

Using this very popular logic, heretical teaching insisted that someone who was "*in the flesh*" could not be divine. The apostles, in the early Christian church, proclaimed and taught that Christ was truly divine. These "*modern thinkers*" were attempting to modify that Gospel message and sought to proclaim that Jesus only "*seemed*" or "*appeared*" to be in a human body. Thus, the '*attack*' on the Church was no longer being waged by '*outside*' political forces, but by persons within the organization itself!

This heresy struck at the foundations of Christian faith and doctrine and brought into question these most important apostolic teachings:

- THE ATONEMENT – *John's opponents asserted that the divine Christ could not have died on the cross; he only appeared to be in a physical body; the divine Christ could not have borne human sin either; so he only appeared to die for our sins.*
- THE RESURRECTION – *John's opponents taught that the Easter event was not a true physical resurrection; it was only spiritual; therefore, our physical bodies will not rise from death.*
- HOLY LIVING – *John's opponents taught that since Jesus "only appeared" to live a holy life in a physical body; but, this can't be the case since flesh is inherently sinful. Therefore, God does not expect us to live a holy (ethical) life in our physical bodies; Jesus is not our example of holy living . . . so you can pursue all of the passions and pleasures of the world!*

The structure of III John, like II John, is written in the standard epistolary format of the time; it is the shortest book in the Greek New Testament. Like II John, III John begins with an introductory formula which mentions both the sender and the addressee. It is the only one of the Johannine letters to be addressed to a named individual. Unlike II John, the letter includes a health wish

for the recipient. Following the body of the letter, as in II John, there is a concluding formula and greetings on behalf of others.

A COMPARISON OF BIBLICAL TEXTS: III John: 1–4 “John’s joy in Gaius”

[COMMON ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATION] {Hereafter “CEB”}

From the elder. To my dear friend Gaius, whom I truly love. ² Dear friend, I’m praying that all is well with you and that you enjoy good health in the same way that you prosper spiritually. ³ I was overjoyed when the brothers and sisters arrived and spoke highly of your faithfulness to the truth, shown by how you live according to the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this: to hear that my children are living according to the truth.

[NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION TRANSLATION] {Hereafter “NRSV”}

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. ² Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you and that you may be in good health, just as it is well with your soul. ³ I was overjoyed when some of the friends arrived and testified to your faithfulness to the truth, namely how you walk in the truth. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

[AMPLIFIED BIBLE TRANSLATION] {Hereafter “AMP”}

The elderly elder [of the church addresses this letter] to the beloved (esteemed) Gaius, whom I truly love. ² Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in every way and [that your body] may keep well, even as [I know] your soul keeps well and prospers. ³ In fact, I greatly rejoiced when [some of] the brethren from time to time arrived and spoke [so highly] of the sincerity and fidelity of your life, as indeed you do live in the Truth [the whole Gospel presents]. ⁴ I have no greater joy than this, to hear that my [spiritual] children are living their lives in the Truth.

NOW FOR A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS PORTION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

Verses 1-2 - Again, as in II John, the author refers to himself as *the elder*. The addressee’s name, *Gaius*, was a very common one in the Roman Empire; it is highly unlikely that the person addressed here is the same Gaius associated with Paul (Rom 16:23; 1 Cor. 1:14; Acts 19:29, 20:4). Gaius is well-known to the author of III John, but it is not so certain whether they had met in person before or not, since the report of Gaius’ conduct toward the brothers is heard second-hand by the author. Nor is it certain whether Gaius belonged to the same local church as Diotrephes (*whom we will meet in vs. 9*) or was himself the leader of another local congregation. It is clear, however, that the author of III John regarded Gaius as orthodox (*vs. 3*) and a valuable ally in the controversy with the secessionist opponents and their false Christology. It should be mentioned that there is a fourth-century tradition recorded in the *Apostolic Constitutions* (ca. 370 AD) which states that John the Apostle ordained Gaius as the first Bishop of Pergamum, but this is highly questionable because of the relatively late date. The only certain information about this individual must be obtained from III John itself, and there is nothing there to make such a claim.

The Apostle here affirms that Gaius is well-off spiritually (*“it is well with your soul”*). He prays that Gaius’ physical **health** would match his spiritual health. The *“health wish”* as pointed out previously, is a standard feature of the first-century epistolary format, but has been extended by the author here to include not only a wish for physical health, but for spiritual health as well! As the teacher of Gaius, John can have no greater satisfaction than to know that his pupil is “living by the truth”!

Verses 3-4 - The noun **“truth”** in these Johannine letters may refer to orthodox Christological belief (1 John 2;21-23; 4:2, 6; 5:10, 20; 2 John 7) or to ethical behavior (1 John 1;6, 2:4, 3:18-19, 4:20). Here it could refer to either. Certainly the author of III John assumes Gaius’ orthodoxy and makes no effort to correct his doctrine. But according to vs. 5 (*to be seen below*) it is Gaius’ faithful work on behalf of the brothers – the traveling missionaries who needed support – which is commended by John. Therefore, in this context, the emphasis is on Gaius’ behavior rather than on his proper orthodox Christological doctrine. While it is possible that the author of III John may be referring to Gaius as one of his own converts (like Paul refers to his “spiritual children” in 1 Cor. 4:14-15, Gal 4:19, Philemon 10) but more likely the author simply regards those under his spiritual authority as his **“children.”**

A COMPARISON OF BIBLICAL TEXTS: III John: 5–8 “Christian Hospitality”

⁵ *Dear friend, you act faithfully in whatever you do for our brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers.* ⁶ *They spoke highly of your love in front of the church. You all would do well to provide for their journey in a way that honors God,* ⁷ *because they left on their journey for the sake of Jesus Christ without accepting any support from the Gentiles.* ⁸ *Therefore, we ought to help people like this so that we can be coworkers with the truth.* {CEB}

⁵ *Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the friends, even though they are strangers to you;* ⁶ *they have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on in a manner worthy of God;* ⁷ *for they began their journey for the sake of Christ, accepting no support from non-believers.* ⁸ *Therefore we ought to support such people, so that we may become co-workers with the truth.* {NRSV}

⁵ **Beloved, it is a fine and faithful work that you are doing when you give any service to the [Christian] brethren, and [especially when they are] strangers.** ⁶ **They have testified before the church of your love and friendship. You will do well to forward them on their journey [and you will please do so] in a way worthy of God’s [service].** ⁷ **For these [traveling missionaries] have gone out for the Name’s sake (for His sake) and are accepting nothing from the Gentiles (the heathen, the non-Israelites).** ⁸ **So we ourselves ought to support such people [to welcome and provide for them], in order that we may be fellow workers in the Truth (the whole Gospel) and cooperate with its teachers.** {AMP}

NOW FOR A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS PORTION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

But first, a word about **Hospitality** which is emphasized in several places in the New Testament:

- 1 Peter 4:9 - ***Open your homes to each other without complaining.***
- Hebrews 13:2 - ***Don't neglect to open up your homes to guests, because by doing this some have been hosts to angels without knowing it.***
- 1 Timothy 5:10 - ***She should have a reputation for doing good: raising children, providing hospitality to strangers, washing the feet of the saints, helping those in distress, and dedicating herself to every kind of good thing.***
- Romans 12:13. - ***Contribute to the needs of God's people, and welcome strangers into your home.***

In particular, a church leader is to be hospitable –

- 1 Timothy 3:2 - ***So the church's supervisor must be without fault. They should be faithful to their spouse, sober, modest, and honest. They should show hospitality and be skilled at teaching.***
- Titus 1:8 - ***Instead, they should show hospitality, love what is good, and be reasonable, ethical, godly, and self-controlled.***

Verse 5 - Addressing Gaius as ***Dear friend***, the “elder” commends him for his faithful service to the traveling missionaries (***the brothers***), even though he did not know them personally (***even though they are strangers***).

Verse 6 - The missionaries have returned and informed the author's home church of Gaius' support for them and their mission (***your love***). The author now asks for additional assistance from Gaius as the missionaries prepare to go out a second time.

Verse 7 - ***'The Name'*** refers to Jesus' name. The traveling missionaries sent out to combat the false teaching of the secessionist opponents have been ***accepting nothing from the pagans***, that is, non-Christians. Their mission is not evangelization, but concerns an “in-house” debate over Christology.

Verse 8 - The first person plural here is inclusive – the author refers to himself, Gaius, and all genuine Christians, all of whom should ***become coworkers in cooperation with the truth*** by supporting the efforts of the traveling missionaries (***such people***) in their efforts to resist and counteract the teaching of the secessionist opponents.

A COMPARISON OF BIBLICAL TEXTS: III John: 9–12 “Diotrephes and Demetrius”

⁹ *I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, doesn't welcome us. ¹⁰ Because of this, if I come, I will bring up what he has done—making unjustified and wicked accusations against us. And as if that were not enough, he not only refuses to welcome the brothers and sisters but stops those who want to do so and even throws them out of the church! ¹¹ Dear friend, don't imitate what is bad but what is good. Whoever practices what is good belongs to God. Whoever practices what is bad has not seen God. ¹² Everyone speaks highly of Demetrius, even the truth itself. We also speak highly of him, and you know that what we say is true.* {CEB}

⁹ *I have written something to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. ¹⁰ So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing in spreading false charges against us. And not content with those charges, he refuses to welcome the friends, and even prevents those who want to do so and expels them from the church. ¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate what is evil but imitate what is good. Whoever does good is from God; whoever does evil has not seen God. ¹² Everyone has testified favorably about Demetrius, and so has the truth itself. We also testify for him, and you know that our testimony is true.* {NRSV}

⁹ *I have written briefly to the church; but Diotrephes, who likes to take the lead among them and put himself first, does not acknowledge my authority and refuses to accept my suggestions or to listen to me. ¹⁰ So when I arrive, I will call attention to what he is doing, his boiling over and casting malicious reflections upon us with insinuating language. And not satisfied with that, he refuses to receive and welcome the [missionary] brethren himself, and also interferes with and forbids those who would welcome them, and tries to expel (excommunicate) them from the church. ¹¹ Beloved, do not imitate evil, but imitate good. He who does good is of God; he who does evil has not seen (discerned or experienced) God [has enjoyed no vision of Him and does not know Him at all]. ¹² Demetrius has warm commendation from everyone—and from the Truth itself; we add our testimony also, and you know that our testimony is true.* {AMP}

NOW FOR A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS PORTION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

Verse 9 - *Diotrephes* is an influential person, perhaps the leader in a local church known to Gaius, but to which Gaius (*himself*) does not belong. Quite obviously, Diotrephes does not agree with John concerning the travelling preachers. He is not a heretic but a Christian who has a different viewpoint from that of John. We are told he is filled with his own importance. John suggests that he is an arrogant person and he has demonstrated this in his refusal to acknowledge the author's prior written communication. We can speculate that the author's written communication concerned the traveling missionaries (*see verse 10*) and Diotrephes has refused to acknowledge the author's authority to intervene in the matter.

Verse 10 - Concerning Diotrephes the author of III John gives a warning: because Diotrephes did not recognize the author's authority, the author will expose Diotrephes' behavior for what it is if the author comes for a visit. Since Diotrephes made **unjustified charges** against the author, the author will bring charges of his own against Diotrephes.

Verse 11 - The statement **do not imitate what is bad but what is good** is clearly a reference to Diotrephes' behavior. By implication, at least, the author calls into question the genuineness of Diotrephes' faith (**the one who does what is bad has not seen God**).

Verse 12 - Demetrius is apparently someone Gaius has not met. He has a very good reputation. It appears that Demetrius is coming to Gaius' church and needs hospitality and assistance, so the author is writing to commend him to Gaius and 'vouch for' him. It is difficult to know more about Demetrius with any certainty, but the author is willing to give him a powerful personal endorsement. Demetrius may well have been the leader of a delegation of traveling missionaries, and may even have been the bearer of this letter to Gaius. The writing of letters of introduction to be carried along by representatives or missionaries in New Testament times is also attested in Paul's writings. References to "**the truth**" are specifically made in distinction to, among other things, the salvific significance of Jesus death on the cross. Remember in this context our previous discussions and the affirmation from I John 5:6 that Jesus came "**not by water only, but by the water and the blood.**"

A COMPARISON OF BIBLICAL TEXTS: III John: 13-15 "Summary and Final Greetings"

¹³ **I have a lot to say to you, but I don't want to use pen and ink.** ¹⁴ **I hope to see you soon, and we will speak face-to-face.** ¹⁵ **Peace be with you. Your friends here greet you. Greet our friends there by name.** {CEB}

I have much to write to you, but I would rather not write with pen and ink; ¹⁴ **instead I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face.** ¹⁵ **Peace to you. The friends send you their greetings. Greet the friends there, each by name.** {NRSV}

I had much [to say to you when I began] **to write, but I prefer not to put it down with pen** (a reed) **and ink;** ¹⁴ **I hope to see you soon, and we will talk together face to face.** ¹⁵ **Peace be to you!** (Good-bye!) **The friends here send you greetings. Remember me to the friends there** [to every one of them personally] **by name.** {AMP}

NOW FOR A CLOSER LOOK AT THIS PORTION OF THE BIBLICAL TEXT:

As in last week's study of II John 12, the author, once again, states he has ***many things to write*** to Gaius, but prefers not to communicate them in writing. Verse 14 states the author's desire to communicate with Gaius in person rather than by means of letter: it appears that the author anticipates a personal visit to Gaius' church in the near future, in order to settle the problem in truth and love (***we will speak face to face***). This verse parallels 2 John 12. The author closes with greetings similar to II John 13.

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION:

1. Think of some modern examples of ways we can be like Gaius and ways we should not be like Diotrophes.
2. Compare the actions of Diotrophes to how we should treat false teachers.
3. Do we, as members/friends @ SAKLC, show sufficient joy and enthusiasm for the growth "*in truth and love*" of converts to Christianity? How might we improve?
4. Are all Christian families required to be hospitable? Does this mean entertaining Christian friends for a meal so that they can later invite us? Or, does it mean something greater than this?
5. What is the right balance between the authority of the local pastor/ordained minister and other preachers/teachers in today's congregations?
6. Should we encourage the activities of evangelists and teachers who are independent of the control of any recognized church or denomination?

SAKLC_EPISTLES OF JOHN_LessonPlan#12_2014.04 per hjm