

## NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDUCTIVE STUDY OF THIRD JOHN

From the shortest book in the Bible, Second John, we are going to move on to the second shortest, Third John, which has only one extra verse. We accepted in the earlier study the tradition that Second John was written by John the apostle in his usual simple, passionate style. He dealt with one of his favourite words, truth, and the attacks which were happening in his day and have occurred ever since. He made it clear that criticism of truth is criticism of Jesus Christ, who is the Truth,(Jn.14:6) not some hair-splitting dispute about trivia.(Tit.3:9) Now in Third John the same writer revisits the same theme and then develops further another of his favourite words, love. 'Love' and its derivative 'beloved' are found seven times in fourteen verses.

In English we are confused by the choice of the word 'love' which we use in at least four different senses. The Greek language was so much more precise having four different words, one each for married love, eros; friendship was philos, parental love was storge, and the love of God, agape. It can have a big effect on our understanding to know which Greek word is being used in the New Testament. For example here in Third John 'love' is agape in verses 1(twice), 2, 5, 6 and 11 but the term chosen in verse 9 which describes Diotrephes 'who loves to be first' is a word derived from philos. According to John the normal consequence of the truth of God is the love of God, and the only source of God's love is in His truth.

The letter was addressed to Gaius but this was a common first name. There is no indication if this was the Gaius from Derbe who travelled with Paul,(Acts 19:29; 20:4) or Gaius apparently from Corinth who was baptised there by Paul and become famous as 'host to the whole church' in Corinth.(I Cor.1:14; Rom.16:23) Whomever he might have been there is no doubt that he was loved by God, being described as 'beloved' no less than four times. What is also clear is where such love for a fellow Christian comes from. It is 'in truth'.(verse 1) It is only because we know the Truth, Jesus, that we will love as He loves.(Jn.13:34,35)

In praying for Gaius, John twice uses the word 'prosper'. Should we understand from this that he wants him to be materially rich? This is the only place in the New Testament from which modern 'prosperity' teaching could come. It is interesting that the word he picks here means 'a good journey' and is not the same word which describes the 'prosperity' of the Ephesian silversmiths,(Acts 19:25) which means 'good means', or the word Paul chose in Phil.4:12 which is literally 'abundance'. John on this occasion is clearly referring to the life journey of the soul going well. On the other hand in I Cor.16:2, 'prosper' is again 'a good journey' so it might at times be used to speak of a businessman, as in Corinth, having a successful week financially which would allow him to give generously to the needs of others. The two senses could well overlap as they did here for Gaius who was very practical about his love for Christian brothers he did not even know. He supported them very well as Christian workers who needed material provision but who had been very careful not to seek money from unbelievers. Everyone recognised that Gaius' generosity was simply because the truth worked in his life and he wanted to do everything he could to see the truth spread further afield.(verses 2-8)

Sadly Gaius' example was in sharp contrast to another member of this group, Diotrephes, whose passion was not the love of God but for his own reputation. His lack of God's love went hand in hand with his rejection of the truth. He was unwilling to care for the visiting Christian workers and actually pushed them out of the church so they would not cost him in hospitality. To cover his own meanness he slandered John and those with him. John was quite prepared to confront Diotrephes when he came back to visit them again, not for the sake of his own reputation but because the truth was being undermined by the absence of love. John spells out the sad truth that while good comes from knowing God, evil means that the one who does it knows nothing of the truth of who Jesus is. He wants Gaius and the others to choose carefully which path they are going to follow, to continue their 'good journey'.(verses 8-11)

All was not lost however. Another believer, Demetrius, was a lovely example of truth working. Everyone who met him was impressed and blessed. The difference from Diotrephes was obvious.(verse 12)

John closes in a way very similar to his previous letter with a deep desire to come in person because he knew the power of a message which was not just in words whether written or spoken, but lived out in human contact. He wanted to give and receive in loving hospitality as Gaius and the visiting workers had done. This would be particularly special if this visit followed his lonely time of imprisonment on the island of Patmos. He wanted to be a friend among friends, celebrating the truth together.(verses 13,14)

#### QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION.

1. Some people say that there is no such thing as absolute truth. How would you answer them?(Lk.1:4; Jn.8:32; 14:6)
2. What according to John does 'walking in the truth' look like? What practical example does he use? Why is this so important in a Christian fellowship? (Heb.13:1,2)
3. If you had visited the church to which John was writing how would it have been different according to whether you met Diotrephes or Demetrius? In what form do we meet similar people today? What effects do such attitudes have on strangers who come into such a group? Why do we ourselves behave like one or other of these two at times?
4. How was John proposing to deal with Diotrephes? Wasn't he judging him? Why is what he intended to do so important for the health of the church?(Gal.2:14)