PARALLEL GUIDE 33
The Johannine Letters

Summary

The three letters attributed to John contain similarities with the Fourth Gospel which suggest a common author. The first of the three, however, is probably not a letter, but a set of notes written to reverse a dangerous trend. Second and 3 John are true letters, although we do not know much about the situation that produced them. Possibly these works are products of a school which sought to answer theological concerns about the nature of Christ and the characteristics of a Christian community.

Learning Objectives

• Read 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John

• Discover the content and intent of 1 John

• Learn the meaning of “the new dispensation”

• Learn the myth of the Antichrist

• Explore what it means to be “Children of God”

• Learn how the author handles the meaning and importance of love

• Understand the need for prayer as presented by 2 John

• Understand the importance of hospitality

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Read again 1 John 4:1-18. Take some time for yourself; perhaps take a walk or listen to some quiet music. Reflect upon the way in which the author of 1 John presents the love of God and how this affects your life and has influenced our culture in both its abuse and its application.

2. The theme of the Antichrist appears in the Johannine material. How and where is this concept reflected today? Make a list of who or what events you think are described by that metaphor.

3. What do you find are the similarities between the Gospel According to John and the works attributed to the same or similar authors? This comparison will carry you to the next lesson which is about the Revelation of John of Patmos.

Preparing for Your Seminar

The role of treating guests with hospitality is a biblical admonition that you encountered in your studies of the Old Testament. How does the Johannine material inform this? What does it suggest about the way in which your EFM group receives guests or new members?

Works Cited

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For Further Reading

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J. L. Houlden, *A Commentary on the Johannine Epistles*, Black's [Harper's] New Testament Commentaries (London: Black; New York: Harper & Row, 1973).

Judith Lieu, *The Second and Third Epistles of John, Studies of the New Testament and Its World* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1986).

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Chapter 33
THE JOHANNINE LETTERS

Who Wrote 1 John? Why and When?

There are obvious similarities of style between 1 John and the Fourth Gospel, such as the use of dark/light imagery (1:5-7; 2:10-11; cf. John 8:12; 9:5; 11:9-10; 12:35, 40). There are similarities as well in outline. Both begin with a preface or prologue that refers to "the Word" (1:1; cf. John 1:1) and reminds the reader of Genesis 1:1. These common characteristics suggest common authorship to many readers. Dionysius of Alexandria, who died around 264, said that while the Revelation to John clearly could not be by the author of the Fourth Gospel, 1 John obviously was. "To characterize them generally all through," he said, "one may observe one and the same complexion in the Gospel and the Epistle" (Eusebius, Eccl. Hist. 7.25.18-21).

Nonetheless, there are differences between 1 John and the Gospel. In 1 John there is stress on the sacrifice and atonement made by Jesus (1:7; 2:2; 3:16; 4:10), while the Gospel tends to emphasize that Jesus' death is the manifestation of glory, his and his Father's (12:27-32; 13:1; 14:30-31; 16:10-11, 33; 17:1). The word paraklētos ("advocate" or "comforter") is found in the New Testament only in John and 1 John. In 1 John the word is applied only to Jesus (2:1), while in the Gospel the Holy Spirit is "another" Paraclete (John 14:16, 26; 15:26; 16:7). The Gospel refers frequently to the Scriptures; 1 John only once directly (3:12) and never by quotation. None of these differences alone is fatal to the notion of common authorship, but taken together they are sufficient to encourage scholars to think the situation may be more complex.

As a number of scholars suggest, there was almost certainly a Johannine "school," a community or group of communities which regarded the Fourth Gospel as its foundation document. That Gospel's perspective and language were distinctively its own. If 1 John was written by a student or close colleague of whoever wrote the Fourth Gospel, then our difficulty is eased. The Gospel and the epistle were very likely written by different members of the same school to meet rather different situations.

The Gospel was written in part to assist the church in its debate with the synagogue. To this end the Gospel presents and defends its christology on the basis of scripture and rabbinic tradition as the evangelist understood them. Jesus is presented as "the Word made flesh." The epistle seems to presuppose the Gospel and in large measure to be concerned with opposing certain misunderstandings of it. Written perhaps a decade or so after the Gospel, 1 John is not formally a letter at all, but rather a homily-like treatise. The problem now is not the synagogue down the street, but fellow Christians who teach a doctrine regarded by the author of 1 John as deception (2:26).

The Gospel had offered a "high" christology: Jesus was the Word made flesh. The teachers whom the author of 1 John opposed seem to have offered a christology so "advanced" that it virtually denied the significance of Jesus' earthly life (4:2-3). Perhaps they appealed to the Johannine Christ himself, who had declared that "it is the spirit that gives life, the flesh is useless" (John 6:63). This kind of christology is said to be "docetic," from a Greek word meaning "seem" or "appear." Docetists assert that Jesus only seemed to be human, that he took on only the appearance

of a man. The later church, like the author of 1 John, rejected docetism decisively and insisted upon the real humanity of Jesus Christ. The second part of the catholic creeds is so long and detailed, compared to the first and third, because it was from the beginning much easier to convince people that Jesus was really divine than to convince them that he was really human.

Similarly, these false teachers tended to discount the significance of sinful acts (3:7-10). After all, if the body is of no account, then neither is an act performed by the body. Lack of realism about physical existence leads either to an unhealthy indifference to one's body or to libertinism. These teachers probably regarded themselves as legitimately developing the implications of the Fourth Gospel, possibly involving an increasing number of Gentile converts in the Johannine churches. If so, then Paul was not alone in discovering that a doctrine of grace could be converted by Gentiles into a doctrine of moral indifference.

Examining the Text 1:1-4

Like the prologue to the Fourth Gospel, the opening verses of 1 John draw the reader back to two beginnings: the creation of the world by God and the Incarnation of the Word in Jesus. The focus is on what has been witnessed and now must be witnessed to: "what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life" (1:1). The next verse reminds us forcefully of John 1:14. Here the "word of life" is not so much the Word that became flesh in Jesus as it is the common apostolic gospel. To hand on the word about Jesus is to handle the Word that was heard, seen, and handled from the beginning. Just ask Thomas, who handled his Lord at the end of the Fourth Gospel (John 20:24-29), or any Christian then or now who knows his or her Lord in handling bread and wine at the Lord's table. While the church was debating what documents should be read in the church as authoritative for the community, these opening words of 1 John were readily regarded as evidence of eyewitness testimony to Jesus and therefore to apostolic origin. The author of 1 John claims the right to give correction to the community: he appeals to what all have known all along ("from the beginning") and will oppose those who depart from it. With the longer perspective of twenty centuries, we can read these words as demonstrating not apostolic authorship but the solidarity of the church's life from one generation to the next.

Religious Experience and the Gospel 1:5-2:6

The epistle begins by qualifying the claim to religious experience in light of conduct. The brutal, undeniable fact of post-baptismal sin was a jolt for the earliest Christians. Claiming fellowship with Christ sounded like a lie on the lips of some in light of the way they lived; was it all a mistake after all? No. The mistake was to try to live as if one's flesh, one's earthly existence, did not matter. A docetic doctrine of Christ and a docetic

doctrine of humanity go together. “This too, too solid flesh” is entirely real, and so are the consequences of life in the flesh. The Incarnation, the real living of the life of God in the world, is the only hope for humanity. To live in the world and not sin is possible only for one who lives in the world the way Jesus did, and only such a person can rightly claim to be in communion with God.

What makes this system work is the ongoing availability of restoration to that communion when it has been broken, so long as the offense is acknowledged. Only those who acknowledge having sinned can be forgiven; those who deny having sinned lie

outside the system until they can admit the reality of their having put themselves out of communion with God by their sin. “My little children,” the author says, “I am writing this so that you may not sin. But if anyone does sin, we have an advocate [paraklētos, see above and Chapter Twelve, on John 14-16] with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous; and he is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (2:1-2). The perpetually open offer, open to all who will take it up, is the language of the kingdom, the language of Israel old and new. The message of Jesus is continuous with the covenant God made with Israel, but the sacrifice of Jesus extends beyond Israel to all humanity. Consequently, no one is superior to anyone else in this system (earlier theologians called it “the economy of salvation”); all humanity is on the same footing. The “gnostic,” the one who claims superior “knowledge” of God, stands self-condemned when actions do not match conduct. How one lives reveals how well one understands.

The New Dispensation 2:7-17

This argument is not new to the epistle’s readers. They have known it from the beginning—just as Jesus sought to recall his hearers to what God had been teaching Israel from the beginning. As he prepared his disciples for his departure, Jesus gave them “a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another” (John 13:34). The author of the epistle reaches back to that word of Jesus, that text in the Gospel that the epistle’s readers surely know: “Beloved, I am writing you no new commandment, but an old commandment that you have had from the beginning; the old commandment is the word that you have heard” (1 John 2:7). More than that, Jesus had said that all the commandments—the whole Torah—are summed up in the command to love God and one’s neighbor (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28); Jesus’ “new commandment” in John functions the same way, but with the emphasis now internal to the community (“one another”). That internal emphasis is the newness of the love commandment in John’s Gospel; the epistle draws out the application still further to oppose the dissidents in the community who claim to be in the light. To forget the charity Christ requires toward one’s fellow believers is to be in darkness still (2:11). This is both old and new, as God’s Word always is (cf. Matt. 13:52).

Then, quite lyrically, the writer affirms the joys of the new age: those he addresses are forgiven, they know God, and already they have overcome evil (2:12-14; cf. 5:4). The little children and the young men and the fathers are addressed separately, but the separation is rhetorical, not theological: all are together in the one community, which is over against the world, not just in it. There is “an irreconcilable opposition between the Christian, who belongs to the new dispensation, and the pagan world, which belongs to the old order, doomed to destruction” (Dodd 1946, 33). The love commandment is stern, for one cannot love both God and the world (cf. Matt. 6:24; Luke 6:13). Here we see 1 John’s roots in Wisdom Literature, especially the “two ways” of good and evil, wisdom and folly. The essence of the world—“the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life,” as older translations of verse 2:16 have it—is not “from” the Father at all but “from” the world. This is the language of the Fourth Gospel: where you are “from” is what matters, what identifies you as what you are. It is the language of origin, of birth, of citizenship. What can be so devastating as “You’re not from around here, are you?”

The Truth and the Lie 2:18-28

The writer begins with the myth of the Antichrist, which he promptly "demythologizes." The Antichrist is no beast from the pit: in fact, there are many "antichrists," for they are the false teachers who lead people astray from the true Christ. This is harsh language. Yet coming from a century that has suffered the rise of Nazism and still suffers from racism and militarism, we can hardly argue any longer that it does not matter what we believe, so long as we are sincere. "The final adversary of truth is the lie, whoever utters it" (Dodd 1946, 50). The lie is the denial that "Jesus is the Christ," perhaps by placing so great an emphasis on the preexistence of the logos (John 1:1-14) that the life of Jesus is denied any real significance. Against this lie, the heresy of docetism, the writer again appeals to the Johannine tradition itself (2:22-25; cf. John 20:31).

"Antichrist" is characteristic of "the last hour." Here we see the seriousness of the epistle's charges against those who mislead God's people: this is a matter of eschatological import. When Jesus came to his last hour, he saw it as the judgment of this world and the glorifying of God. Not to take his Passion and death as real, to deny "that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh" (4:2), is to put oneself outside the community of faith and so to make clear that one has been living a lie (2:19). The false teachers have now left the community, and those who remain are being encouraged to stay faithful to what they have been taught from the beginning.

That teaching has led them to make a true confession of faith in Jesus as Messiah (cf. John 20:31), the Incarnation of God's life in the world. Further, they have all been anointed by him, and now they all know (2:20, 27). These are the true gnostics. They really know because they have been taught by God, which is the sign of that new covenant that the eschaton, the "end time," is to bring according to Jeremiah 31:31-34, where people know God because God has forgiven them. This is the presupposition of the epistle, and the gospel, and the church.

What it Means to be Children of God 2:29-3:10

That we should be called "children of God" is itself a gift of God's love (cf. Rom. 8:15-18). The world does not yet recognize who we are because the world does not recognize who God is. Even we do not understand what it will all finally mean, but we ought to understand that we will be perfected beyond our imaginings by Christ's presence. Our task, our goal, is to be like him, which he will accomplish in us if we are faithful to him (3:1-3).

Presumably there were those among the false teachers whose attitude to sin and sanctification was more relaxed than the writer's (see above 1:5-2:6). The writer's response is forthright, yet this very response may lead—especially in English!—to precisely the confusion that was dealt with in verses 2:1-2. The writer himself is not now saying that Christians never sin but that Christians do not sin habitually. The key Greek verbs in verses 1:9-2:2 are all in tenses that denote single completed actions, separate acts in the past. In verses 3:4-10, however, the key verbs are tenses that refer to continuous action. These expressions therefore refer to a fixed habit of sin, such as might be the behavior of those who regard sin as irrelevant to them or nonexistent—precisely the error of those false teachers who have departed from the community of faith.

First, the writer is saying that Christians do indeed commit sins and know they need forgiveness (1:9-2:2); but, second, those who are serious about being Christians will simply not allow themselves to keep on sinning without grief or some attempt at amendment (3:4-10). This is the response that the kerygma always requires: that we confess the faith and attempt obedience, admit our disobedience when it occurs, and claim the promise of God to forgive us and restore us to fellowship when we repent. "No one born of God simply

keeps on sinning" might be a way of bringing out the essential meaning of verse 3:9a.

Love and Hatred 3:11-18

The specifically Christian righteousness is love (agapē). This principle is first illustrated negatively by appeal to the story of Cain and Abel, the only explicit allu- sion to the OT in 1 John. Then, much more importantly, it is illustrated positively by a reminder of the example of Christ, who "laid down his life for us" so that "we ought to lay down our lives" for one another (3:16). "It is strictly true, in the history of thought and language, that we know what agapē means from the fact that Christ laid down his life for us" (Dodd 1946, 85). This love must be our aim "not in word or speech, but in deed and truth" (3:18). What use to anyone is a purely "spiritual" religion?

This way of love will drive home to believers that they are indeed "from the truth," which means that truth is what has brought them to be who they are. This is a very Johannine turn of phrase; in the gospel Jesus frequently contrasts those who are "from the devil" with those who are "from God." Those who steadfastly seek to live in love will become increasingly confident in God and in their sense of being in right relation to God, so that occasional instances of sinfulness cannot destroy trust. Love of God and neighbor, in the community of faith, is the greatest antidote we have to guilt, scrupulosity, and spiritual depression. Moreover, the believer's fellowship with God is confirmed by the gift of the Holy Spirit, just as Jesus promised in the gospel (3:19; cf. John 14:23-26).

True and False Inspiration 4:1-6

Not every spirit, however, is the spirit of God. The test, as always, is our attitude to the incarnate Lord (4:2-3; cf. 1 Cor. 12:1-3). This is the old Torah test for a true prophet (cf. Deut. 18:15-22): Does the new voice teach that what you were taught "from the beginning" was true? After all, God does not change; we may need to reinterpret, but not reject, what we have already been taught by faithful teachers in the community. Jesus called God's people back to what they had been given long ago, and the writer of the epistle gives not a new command, but an old one (2:7).

The Love of God 4:7-12

Once again the writer returns to the theme of love. This spiral movement is characteristic of the epistle and of much preaching, reinforcing the impression that 1 John is a sermon with the Gospel as its text. In sentences of unsurpassable brevity and clarity the writer again reminds his readers that the kerygma invites response and by its nature defines what that response should be (see especially 4:9-11). We need be in no doubt what God says or what God wants (cf. Deut. 30:11-14; Rom. 10:6-9); "You have been anointed by the Holy One, and all of you have knowledge" (2:20).

The Basis of Christian Confidence 4:13-18

The interior witness of the Spirit is linked to the proclamation of the Incarnation (4:13-15). This is the ground for the statement (often quoted out of context) "God is love" (4:16b). Karl Barth observed that if God is love, then we do not know what love is; we only know that God is love, but we have a glimpse of what love is in the Incarnation. By our "abiding" in that love—in a mutual indwelling whereby we place our confidence in it and also endeavor to imitate it—we "may have boldness on the day of judgment" (4:17; cf. 2:28). Those who try to live within the sphere of God's love—as shown by the way they treat their brothers and sisters in the faith—find themselves free from fear of God's wrath (4:18).

Love, Obedience, and Faith 4:19-5:5

The writer begins once again with the interrelationship of gospel and response (4:19) and moves to a condemnation of those who claim to "love" God while neglecting love of fellow Christians. Was this the attitude of the secessionists? Possibly they were among the wealthier members of the community and were neglecting those who had previously been their comrades in faith (cf. 1 Cor. 11, which may indicate a similar problem in Corinth). Another possibility is that those who seceded from the community had a different understanding of John's Gospel. Perhaps the secessionists were focused on Jesus' commanding his disciples to love one another (John 13:35; 15:12) and praying for "his own" (John 17:6) and those they would convert (John 17:20), but not for "the world" (John 17:9). Did the secessionists then feel it right to "love" each other, but not "love" those who did not share their views? The writer of the epistle sounds as if that were the sort of attitude he had toward them. Nowhere does our author advocate love for the heretic secessionists. Why not? Maybe such love is implied at verse 4:19. When he insists that our love be modeled on God's love, the writer knows well enough that God also "sent his Son as the Savior of the world" (4:14; cf. 2:2). Yet nowhere is it stated that those who remain ought to love those who have left. The focus of the epistle's love teaching is entirely internal to the (now purified) community. No doubt the situation was desperate and the damage being done to the church by the secessionists was great. Is that sufficient reason to withhold love, or is there ever any sufficient reason to do so?

We must read with the same charity we demand, of course. We must also not ignore context, and we must not fault the writer for not doing what he never claimed to be attempting. First John is not a systematic theology; it does not cover all cases, all areas of Christian life, all ramifications of the gospel. As we see in discussing 2 and 3 John, the Johannine epistles need to be seen as a package delivered to a congregation (or group of congregations) in crisis, with the limited purpose of bolstering their morale and their faithfulness in a time of great stress. These Christians have had their understanding of gospel and God, of church and Jesus, badly shaken by competing understandings of their foundation document, the Gospel According to John. Now their teacher—"the elder," he is called in 2 and 3 John—comes to their aid by rekindling their confidence in what they have been taught. This writer is teacher and pastor to those who are left, not to their opponents; he leaves the latter to their own end. They have, after all, left of their own accord; they have not been ejected, so far as we can tell from 1 John. If he does not say the secessionists ought to be loved, neither does he say they ought to be hated.

Who are our Christian brothers and sisters? Those who hold to the teaching they have had "from the beginning"; one can tell who they are by whether they keep God's commandments, and God's commandments are not "burdensome" (5:3). That is, Torah—God's Wisdom, God's Spirit, God's Word—is an easy yoke to wear (cf. Matt. 11:28-30), since it is not worn alone but with God in community with other commandment-keepers. Here is the Jewish Wisdom background that the epistle shares with the gospel, and indeed with much else in early Christian literature.

Witness to the Faith 5:7-13

The Spirit is true because the Spirit proceeds from the true God. Therefore the witness of the Spirit agrees also with the apostolic witness. Internal and external witness are one (5:8). To abandon this witness is to abandon the faith. And the core of the faith is the reality of the Incarnation, the real humanity of the Son of God. Herein lies our confidence as believers.

Prayer 5:14-17

In verse 5:14 the writer speaks again of Christian "boldness." As in all things, we must try to pray in accordance with God's will. Such prayer carries the response within it (cf. Mark 11:24; Luke 11:13), for praying in the Spirit of God involves seeing as God does. Thus we are to pray even for the sinner (5:16), as

one for whom Christ died, for it is surely God's will that the sinner be whole (cf. John 3:17). But then the writer hesitates. Perhaps again, to be sympathetic, we must keep in mind the appalling damage that is being done to the household of faith by the secessionists. The writer cannot even bear to name what they have done (5:16b). Should the readers be commanded to pray even for them? The writer does not do so. Such prayer is not forbidden, but it is not required. The important thing the writer wants to get across to this community is that, yes, they really do commit sin from time to time, but even then God will receive them back for the Son's sake.

Perhaps those who have left have falsely taught a kind of perfectionism and tried to deny forgiveness and fellowship to those who could not meet their standard. The emphasis this writer puts on the reality of sin and forgiveness for the faithful certainly will have no truck with such an understanding of God. The Jesus proclaimed in the Fourth Gospel does not come to find perfection but to bring it, that we might purify ourselves as he is pure (3:3). Any perfection believers have is theirs by grace, not by merit.

The Christian Assurance 5:18-21

The writer concludes with three confident aphorisms, each beginning "we know" (cf. 2:20). Those born of God are protected by the One born of God (5:18) and sin does not characterize their lives. God's children are held safe from "this naughty world" where their Adversary holds sway. The Son has come—in the flesh—to give light, understanding, and hope. This is the "word of life" with which the epistle began (1:1) and that we have known "from the beginning" of our life in Christ. Finally, "Little children, keep yourselves from idols" (5:21). The "idol" is a substitute for "him who is true" (5:20). Always we must be on guard against substitutes for God. Israel's battles against idolatry continue for God's people in every age. The surest way to keep this last injunction of the epistle is by remaining faithful to what we have known from the beginning—and by loving each other.

Who Wrote 2 John and 3 John— When, Why?

The Second and Third Letters of John are too short for us to be able to say much with certainty about the situation that produced them. Unlike 1 John, they are certainly genuine letters and follow the classic Hellenistic epistolary form. They may have accompanied 1 John originally, perhaps in some sense as covering letters to introduce them to the recipients, since 1 John itself has no indication of authorship or authority. But there is not a word in either 2 or 3 John that suggests that it is intended as introduction or "cover" for something else. The writer explicitly states in both letters that he prefers face-to-face contact rather than the written word (2 John 12; 3 John 13); but so did Paul, whose letters regularly use similar expressions (e.g., 1 Thess. 2-3; Rom. 10:1-13). Further, expressing a preference for the spoken over the written word was a commonplace in antiquity.

The second letter is from "the elder" (or "the presbyter"), who is readily identified with the apostle John, the son of Zebedee, also credited with writing the Fourth Gospel and the Revelation to John. This identification cannot be demonstrated, and there are strong linguistic reasons (as well as considerations of content) for thinking that the same person cannot have written Revelation and the Gospel and epistle. As indicated above in the introduction to 1 John, the epistle seems to make most sense as a corrective address to a community that knows and reveres the Fourth Gospel.

The elder rejoices to find "some of your children walking in the truth" (2 John 4). "The truth" refers to both belief and behavior. In the body of his letter the elder warns against the reception of secessionist teachers who seem to be spreading exactly the same kinds of teaching that are repudiated at greater length in 1 John (2

John 7-10). His positive advice also accords with 1 John's plea to love one another, not as a new commandment but as what has been heard from the beginning (2 John 5).

To whom is 2 John addressed? The Greek eklektē kyria can be translated "to an elect lady" (meaning either some individual or the church; the Greek word ekklesia, "church," is feminine in gender), or "to a lady [named] Electa" (Clement of Alexandria's understanding, around 200 CE), or "to elect Kyria" (meaning a woman named Kyria). Most scholars tend to a collective and symbolic interpretation indicating the congregation(s) whose leaders are mentioned by name in 3 John. Such a designation was certainly known for churches in the second century (Brown 1982, 654). To be sure, the proper name "Kyria" is quite well documented, too, being a Greek equivalent to Latin "Domina" and Aramaic "Martha." Yet if the reference is to a woman, she does not emerge as an individual even to the extent that Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius do in 3 John. Given the clear address of 3 John to an individual leader of the faithful remnant in this community, the likelihood of 2 John's being addressed to the wider congregation is increased, being consistent not only with its content but also with the scenario of the three letters belonging together.

The Third Letter of John is a letter from "the elder" to Gaius, exhorting him to extend his hospitality to "the friends" (NRSV; the Greek has the plural of adelphos, "brother," which can be used to mean "brothers and sisters") even though they be "strangers" who are journeying "for the sake of Christ" (literally, "for the name's sake," v. 7). Especially he is to receive Demetrius (v. 12). By contrast, Diotrephes is refusing to recognize the elder's authority or to welcome those in communion with

the elder ("the friends" again, vv. 9-10). (In favor of the hypothesis of increasing numbers of Gentiles in the Johannine churches, we note that Gaius, Diotrephes, and Demetrius are all good Greco-Roman names.) In verse 15 "the friends" send greetings, and the elder greets "the friends" (philoi this time, which really means "friends" and not "brothers"; NRSV notes should be followed carefully throughout). There is no indication who these friends were, but presumably they were well enough known to Gaius and to each other to need no further identification.

The connection with the dispute reflected in 1 John is much less obvious for 3 John than for 2 John. The Third Letter of John contains no mention of false teaching, and if taken alone could reflect merely a squabble between two church leaders. Are "the friends" those who are on the elder's and Gaius' side, as opposed to others who are against them? Does 3 John represent an early stage in the dispute, before the differences of doctrine had become apparent? Or is it really unconnected? We have no way of knowing. What is important is not the detail of the historical situation but the truth to which all three epistles testify: love of Christ and one another as essential to the church's health.

End of Chapter