

# 3 John 2

- A letter to my beloved brother (and sister)<sup>1</sup>-

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## Introduction and general information

- ❖ This is a very short letter. We know very little about the context in which this letter was written. The writer mentions some names of persons who are not otherwise known. It is a very personal letter and instructive for the church today.
- ❖ This sermon outline contains a relational chart, which is interesting. It gives us some insight into the church of the first century A.D.
- ❖ One of the most relevant passages for Christians today is found in verse 2:  
“Beloved, **I pray that all may go well with you** and that you may be in good health, **as it goes well with your soul.**”<sup>2</sup>
  - A Christian might have to cope with all kinds of problems, but the most important thing is: **“it goes well with your soul.”** This is a comforting, encouraging, empowering remark of a mature Christian in his letter to his “child” and “friend”, Gaius.
  - (Grand-)Parents should pray for their (grand-)children, and members of a church for each other: **I pray that all may go well with your soul.**
- ❖ This sermon outline contains also a sociogram, a graphic representation of all the relationships mentioned in this letter.

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<sup>1</sup> ©Evert Jan Hempenius (draft)

<sup>2</sup> English Standard Version

## Overview of the letter to my dear friend Gaius (3 John)

- ❖ This letter consists of six small paragraphs, of which paragraph two, three and four begin with “**My dear friend**” (NIV) or “**Beloved**” (ESV). The 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> paragraph together form the body of the letter (see also form and structure):

1. Salutation	Verse 1
2. A health wish and prayer for Gaius	Verse 2-4
3. Approval of the conduct of Gaius and disapproval of the conduct of Diotrephes	Verse 5-10
4. Recommendation of Demetrius	Verse 11-12
5. Concluding personal remarks	Verse 13-14
6. Greetings	Verse 15

## Technical, theological and hermeneutical notes

- ❖ Textual notes:
  - The letter shows the same writing style as the first and second letter of John. There are also thematic connections to the Gospel. Therefore it seems likely that the apostle John is the author. He is the elderly brother of his “children” (verse 4).
- ❖ Theological notes:
  - The Christian **truth** is a central theme in this short letter:
    - 3 Jn. 3–4: “It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to **the truth** and how you continue to walk in **the truth**. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in **the truth**.”
    - 3 Jn. 8: “We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for **the truth**.”
    - 3 Jn 12: “Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by **the truth** itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.”
    - Truth = ἀλήθεια:
      - **1. the quality of being in accord with what is true, truthfulness, dependability, uprightness** in thought and deed.

**2. the content of what is true, *truth***, in general and especially of the content of Christianity as the ultimate truth.<sup>3</sup>

- This truth is not a state of affairs or facts. “The elder” (John) might use “truth” as shorthand for the gospel of Jesus Christ, the truth embodied in Jesus: “I am the way and **the truth** and the life.” In this self-declaration “**the way**”, “**the truth**” and “**the life**” refer to: coming to, knowing and seeing the Father (Jn. 14:6).
- “To walk in the truth” is synonymous with “to walk in the Spirit.” He is the Spirit of truth (Jn. 14:17; 1 Jn. 4:6; 1 Jn. 5:6).
- The letter is also characterized by **love**:
  - He calls Gaius his “beloved one” or “dear friend” three times. “To my dear friend Gaius, **whom I love** in the truth” (3 Jn. 2). Gaius has also been praised by others: “They have told the church **about your love**” (3 Jn. 6).
  - Love = **ἀγάπη**:
    - **1. the quality of warm regard for and interest in another, esteem, affection, regard, love** (without limitation to very intimate relationships).<sup>4</sup>
- The elder is praying. A few translations prefer: “**I wish**” instead of “**I pray**.” Both are correct translations, but in a Christian context “**I pray**” is preferred.
  - To pray = **εὐχόμεαι**:
    - **1. to speak to or to make requests of God, pray. 2. wish.**<sup>5</sup>

❖ Hermeneutical notes:

- For the exposition it is fruitful to refer to the implied author and the implied addressee. We can’t meet the elder, Gaius, Diotrephes, Demetrius, the brothers or the members of the church personally. We don’t have additional information from other sources. There is distance in place and time. Only by implication can we know some things about the author, the addressee and the other people mentioned.
- The implied author makes himself known by:
  - Personal remarks, such as “**The elder**”, which tell us something about his relationship to Gaius and the others and indicate his position in the church.

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<sup>3</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 42).

<sup>4</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 6).

<sup>5</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 417). This dictionary prefers the translation “*I wish*.”

- The use of personal pronouns, such as “I”, “my” and “we”.
- His theological statements and vocabulary. See above.
- The implied addressee is made known by the author of the letter:
  - When he characterizes Gaius through the witness of others and writes about specific (shared) circumstances, such as the opposition of Diotrephes and the example set by Demetrius.
  - When he uses specific personal pronouns, such as “you”, “they”, when he is writing about others (“they” and “he”).
  - When he uses imperatives (and specific figures of style).
    - “do not imitate what is evil but what is good” (3 Jn. 11) tells us something about his concerns about Gaius, and about the choices Gaius is making.

### Form, structure and relationships (sociogram)

- ❖ This letter, sent by an individual (the elder) to another individual (Gaius) follows the pattern of secular letter-writing in the first century A.D.<sup>6</sup>:
  - Salutation (1)
  - A health wish prayer (2-4)
  - The body of the letter (5-12)
  - Personal remarks (13-14)
  - Greeting (15)
- ❖ It is amazing how many relationships, positive or negative, can be noted within this short single letter. It is helpful to chart them like this:
- ❖ Sometimes it is helpful to list and make a sociogram<sup>7</sup> of relationships (elaborated example):

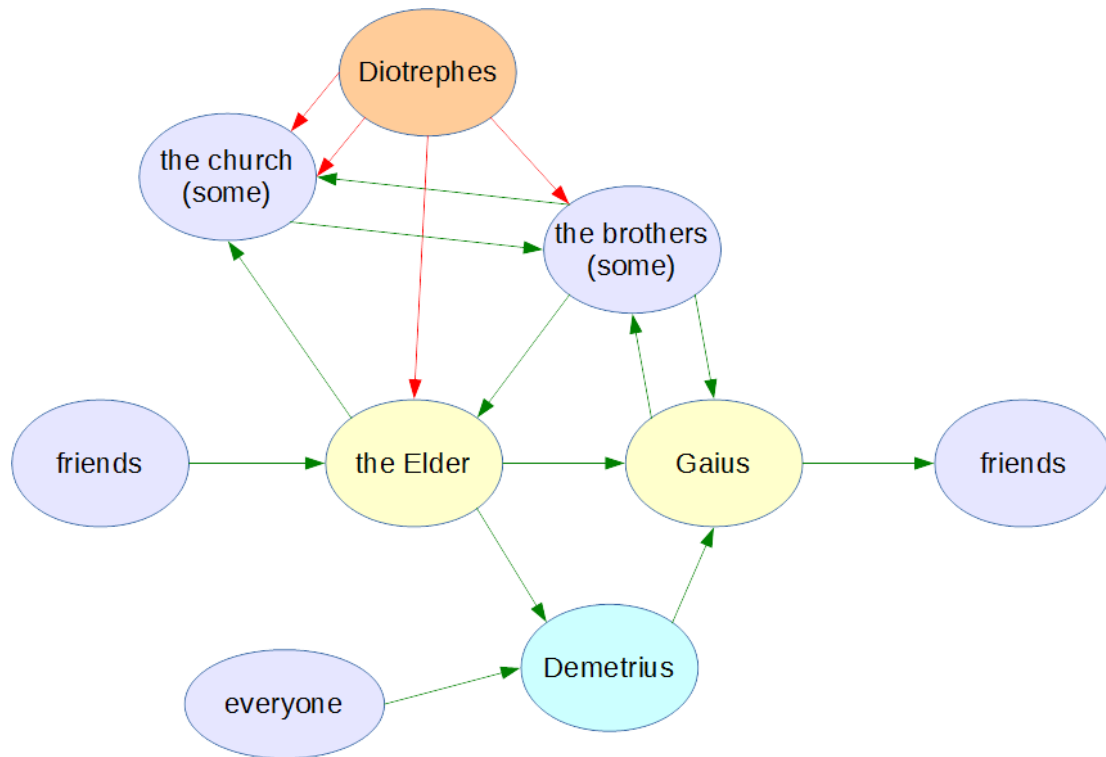
sender	action	receiver	pos/neg
the elder	prays for	Gaius	+++
Gaius	received and supported	the brothers	+++
the brothers (some)	witnessed about Gaius	the elder	+++

<sup>6</sup> Smalley, S. (1984, p. 342).

<sup>7</sup> A **sociogram** is a graphic representation of social network of a person.

the brothers	witnessed about Gaius	the church	+++
the church (some)	wanted to receive	the brothers	+++
Diotrephes	is opposed to	the elder	---
Diotrephes	is opposed to	the brothers	---
Diotrephes	is opposed to	the church (some)	---
Diotrephes	wants to be the first in	the church	---
the elder	wrote a letter and proposed a visit to	the church	+++
everyone	speaks well of	Demetrius	+++
the elder	speaks well of	Demetrius	+++
Demetrius	is an example for	Gaius	+++
friends (who are with The elder)	greet	Gaius	+++
Gaius	greet	friends (who are with Gaius)	+++

The following image shows all relationships in one view. There might be some overlap between the different groups, especially “everyone”. “Everyone” are those who know Demetrius, the elder and Gaius.



## Exposition

### Verse 1

- ❖ **“The elder.”** He doesn’t mention his name, but he is probably the apostle John. Compare 2 Jn. 1.
- ❖ **“To my dear friend Gaius, whom I love in the truth.”** Gaius is a common Roman name. There are three other men mentioned in the New Testament who bear the same name (Rom. 16:23 and 1 Cor. 1:14; Acts 19:29; Acts 20:4). Identification with one of these is not possible. There is a personal relationship between the elder and Gaius. He belongs to his children (verse 4). The elder loves his child Gaius and has a warm regard for and interest in him.

### Verse 2-4

- ❖ **“I pray...”** The elder is praying for his general wellbeing and he especially mentions his health. This illustrates his interest and warm regard. As we all know, worries, problems and health problems can become a burden in life. Disappointments and opposition in the church (Diotrophes, verse 9-10) may hinder and even frustrate the work and the efforts for the kingdom of God. Did the elder worry about these personal circumstances of Gaius?
- ❖ **“as it goes well with your soul.”** The elder is glad and well informed about the wellbeing of the soul of Gaius. (Compare Col. 1:4-6; 1 Thess. 1:3-10; 1 Thess. 3:6-9; Philem. 5-7.)

- This wellbeing is illustrated by **“your faithfulness to the truth”** and **“how you continue to walk in the truth.”** Gaius is, according to the testimony of others, faithful to Jesus Christ and walks in his footsteps (1 Jn. 2:6). An important aspect is **“hospitality”** (verse 8) and **“to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God”** (verse 6) and supply them with the things they need for travel, food and drink and perhaps some money.
- ❖ **“I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth”** reminds us of the words spoken by Jesus in his farewell discourse, John chapter 13-16:
  - “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. **I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.** My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you” (Jn. 15:9-12). See also 2 Jn. 4, Phil. 1:4; 1 Thess. 2:19-20.
    - The commands Jesus refers to are summarized in John 15:12: love each other. How did Jesus love his disciples? By his grace and forgiveness, by his mercy and patience, by his acceptance of sinners and gentleness. (Compare Gal. 5:22-23 and Mt. 11:28-30.)

#### Verse 5-10

- ❖ **“you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers.”** These “brothers” are brothers in Christ. Gaius didn’t know them personally (**“strangers”**). They were travelling from city to city **“for the sake of the Name”**, Jesus Christ. Gaius received and supported them, because they were his brothers. (See also Rom 12:13.)
  - The **“Name”** has important theological connotations. It is the Name of Matthew 28:19.
  - Name = **ὄνομα: the classification under which one belongs, noted by a name or category, title, category.**<sup>8</sup> The Name is not explicitly stated, even omitted because of reverence to God.
    - **“Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me”** (Luke 9:48).
  - The **“Name”** is equivalent to kingdom of God and the presence of the Lord.
- ❖ The brothers have told the church about the faithfulness of Gaius. The elder admonishes Gaius to support them when they leave. The brothers could not rely on the members of the church because of the opposition of Diotrefes. Due to the hospitality that Gaius provided, there was no need for them to ask pagans for help. That would be a shame for the church.
  - They are working together for the advance of the Gospel.
- ❖ **“Diotrefes, who loves to be first”** (verse 9). But:
  - “Jesus said, ‘You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead,

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<sup>8</sup> Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (2000, p. 714).

whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42–44).

- Diotrephes tries to safeguard his position by ignoring the elder and Gaius (“us”; verse 9). Also: **“he refuses to welcome the brothers. He also stops those who want to do so and puts them out of the church”** (verse 10).

“Us” (the elder and Gaius) and “the brothers” are a threat to his position. He is abusing his power and spreading gossips: **“He is gossiping maliciously about us.”**

- Gossip reveals passive aggression by isolating and harming the reputation of others, in this case the elder and Gaius. It is passive aggression, because Diotrephes doesn’t attack them actively with accusations. James, the brother of Jesus, warns against the danger of gossip (James 3:1-12).
- ❖ **“So if I come, I will call attention to what he is doing.”** When the elder visits the church he will talk to the members about the behavior of Diotrephes.

#### Verse 11-12

- **“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.”** Do not imitate Diotrephes in his malicious gossip. Evil can be very frustrating and may evoke bitterness, weariness, anger and revenge, spiritual depression. (See also 1 Pet. 3:8-12.)
  - Everyone who knows Demetrius speaks well of him. (Compare Eph. 5:1-2.) The elder stresses the fact that really everybody, including himself, speak well of this brother who is living according to the standards of the Gospel, **“the truth itself.”**
- **“Anyone who does what is good is from God.”** This is a powerful encouragement for Gaius. It is proof that someone is a child of God, as John wrote in his first letter:
  - **“Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God”** (1 John 4:7).
- **“Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.”** With these words the elder sharply condemns the behaviour of Diotrephes. His heart is not pure (Mt. 5:8). It is deadly threat to the wellbeing of the soul.

#### Verse 13-14

- **“I hope to see you soon, and we will talk face to face.”** The elder wants to discuss many things with Gaius. To talk face to face is far better than to write things down in a letter.
- The elder concludes his letter and sends it with greetings from common friends. Gaius needs to pass on their greetings to other friends personally.
  - “Peace” is a wish of wellbeing in every respect.

### Application

- ❖ It is important to pray for the wellbeing of others, it is a token of Christian love.



- We often know much about each other's wellbeing: one's health, family, jobs. People are using all kinds of social media (if available). Unfortunately, social media often show only the bright side of life.
- But what do we know about the wellbeing of the soul? This is far more important than having good health, a fine job, a life without worries. Jesus said to his disciples: "Do not be afraid of those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul" (Mt. 10:28).
- ❖ There are all kinds of threats to the wellbeing of the soul. Some are too busy to pray or to read the Bible and listen to the voice of God.
  - Gaius and the elder had to deal with malicious gossip. They were ignored and opposed by a leader in the church, Diotrephes. This leader should take good notice of the words of the apostle Paul: "**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit**, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4).
  - Self-appointed leaders in the church are a threat to the spiritual wellbeing of others. Diotrephes even expelled some out of the church.
- ❖ The wellbeing of the soul is illustrated by the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22-23), faith, hope and love (1 Cor. 13:13), pursuing what is good. Demetrius was mentioned as an example for Gaius. Who are our Christian role models?
- ❖ This letter is also a fine example of Christian correspondence through letter-writing and talking face to face. People gave witness about the faithfulness of brothers (and sisters) in church, thereby giving thanks to God and joy to others!
- ❖ A Christian lifestyle is characterized by acts of mercy (Mt. 25:34-40): to feed the hungry; to give drink to the thirsty; to clothe the naked; to shelter the homeless (hospitality); to visit the sick; to visit the imprisoned; to bury the dead. The last one is not mentioned in Matthew 25:34-40, but played an important role in the positive witness of the church in the Roman Empire.

## Bibliography

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