

Homiletics Analysis: 3 John 1

Content & Intent

This Text — Content:

Third John is the shortest book in the New Testament — a personal letter from “the Elder” (the apostle John) to a beloved individual named Gaius. The letter moves through three relational portraits that together constitute its argument: Gaius, who is commended for his faithful hospitality to traveling missionaries and gospel workers; Diotrephes, who is rebuked for his love of preeminence, his rejection of apostolic authority, and his expulsion of those who show hospitality; and Demetrius, who is briefly but firmly commended as a man of good testimony. Woven through these three portraits is the controlling theme of “walking in the truth” — a phrase that appears explicitly in verses 3-4 and implicitly throughout. The letter is not merely a personal commendation: it is a case study in what faithful Christian fellowship, leadership, and accountability look like in practice, and what corrupts them. John closes with an expression of longing for face-to-face conversation, emphasizing that the letter is a provisional measure — the relationship and the church both require more than ink.

This Text — Intent:

God’s intent through this letter is to call His people to the kind of concrete, costly, truth-grounded love that sustains the advance of the gospel — and to name and resist the kind of self-aggrandizing leadership that poisons it. The letter is not merely instructive; it is diagnostic and motivating. Through the contrast of Gaius and Diotrephes, God is pressing a question on every reader: *Which of these am I?* The affirmation of Gaius is designed to model what faithful, other-oriented Christian life looks like. The exposure of Diotrephes is designed to produce self-examination, repentance, and resistance to the same spirit. The commendation of Demetrius reinforces that character and testimony are the currency of gospel ministry. God is seeking to produce in the reader a renewed commitment to truth-grounded love expressed through concrete deeds — hospitality, support, cooperation — while cultivating a holy suspicion of the love of preeminence wherever it appears in Christian community.

Subject Sentence: Walking in truth means costly love for fellow laborers and resistance to self-serving leadership.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to demonstrate the reality of their faith through concrete, gospel-motivated hospitality and cooperation — and to recognize that the love of

preeminence is not merely a character flaw but a gospel-corrupting poison that must be named and resisted.

Interpretive Evaluation

The identity of “the Elder” and the letter’s authority: Some interpreters — particularly in liberal-critical traditions — argue that “the Elder” is a second-century figure distinct from the apostle John, which would render the letter a pseudonymous document carrying only derivative authority. This reading is rejected on multiple grounds: the internal evidence of Johannine style, vocabulary (especially “truth,” “love,” “walking”), and theological concerns is consistent with Johannine authorship; the early church’s reception of the letter as apostolic is coherent with this identification; and there is no compelling reason apart from late-dating assumptions to separate “the Elder” from John the apostle. The Reformed tradition receives the letter as canonical scripture bearing full apostolic authority, and this reading governs the analysis.

Gaius’s hospitality and its application: Some interpreters, particularly in certain Baptist and evangelical streams, have domesticated the application of Gaius’s commendation into a general affirmation of hospitality as a virtue. This is not wrong but is insufficient. The text is not commending hospitality in the abstract — it is commending support for traveling *missionaries and gospel workers* who “went out for the sake of the name” (v. 7) and who “accept nothing from the Gentiles” (v. 7). The hospitality in view is specifically *gospel-missional hospitality* — the concrete material support of those engaged in cross-cultural gospel proclamation. Applications that reduce this to general friendliness or social welcome miss the text’s specific claim. The Reformed reading insists that the text is calling God’s people to active, sacrificial, concrete partnership in gospel mission.

Diotrephes and ecclesial authority: A significant interpretive question is whether Diotrephes represents (a) a personality conflict with no deeper structural significance, (b) an early proto-gnostic figure resisting apostolic teaching, or (c) a legitimate local church leader who had properly gained authority over itinerant missionaries. Some have argued (c) — that Diotrephes represents an emerging monarchical episcopate and John is losing a jurisdictional dispute. This reading is refuted by the text: John does not describe a jurisdictional ambiguity but a moral failure — Diotrephes “loves to have the first place” (v. 9), “does not receive” the apostolic letter, “unjustly accuses” faithful believers, and “forbids” those who wish to show hospitality. These are not administrative decisions; they are acts of pride, slander, and coercion. The text diagnoses Diotrephes not as an over-reaching leader but as an exemplar of what Christian leadership must never become: preeminence-seeking power. The Reformed reading — that Diotrephes represents a spirit of self-aggrandizement that corrupts any leadership structure it occupies — is the reading the text demands.

The “imitate good” instruction (v. 11) and moralism: Some expositors have treated verse 11 — “do not imitate what is evil, but what is good” — as the letter’s key application,

resulting in a moralistic summary: “Be like Gaius, not like Diotrephes.” This is precisely the anti-moralism principle (Clowney) that the framework guards against. The text is not presenting Gaius as a human model to emulate through willpower. The motivating ground is theological and gospel-shaped: Gaius walks in truth (vv. 3-4); the workers went out “for the sake of the name” (v. 7); John’s joy is rooted in the advance of the truth (v. 4). The application is to imitate the pattern *because it is truth-shaped and gospel-grounded* — not because Gaius is an impressive person.

Key Canonical Support

- **Romans 12:13** — “Contributing to the needs of the saints, practicing hospitality” — Paul’s listing of hospitality as a concrete expression of love grounded in the mercies of God (Rom. 12:1) provides the theological ground for what Gaius embodies: not mere social warmth but sacrificial, other-oriented sharing of resources for the sake of the body.
 - **Matthew 10:40-42** — Jesus’ teaching that receiving those sent in His name is receiving Him, and that even a cup of cold water given to a disciple will not lose its reward — establishes the theological logic beneath 3 John: gospel-missional hospitality is not merely practical support but an act of participation in Christ’s own mission; the one who supports the missionary participates in the mission.
 - **Mark 10:42-45** — Jesus’ redefinition of leadership greatness as servant-hood, contrasting the Gentile rulers who “lord it over” their subjects with the Son of Man who came to serve — provides the canonical diagnosis of the Diotrephes spirit: it is the leadership model of the world, not the kingdom, and Christ explicitly names and rejects it.
 - **Philippians 1:3-5** — Paul’s joy and thanksgiving for the Philippians’ “participation in the gospel from the first day until now” — shows that gospel partnership expressed through concrete material support (as in Gaius’s case) is a recognized and valued category in apostolic thought; those who support gospel workers are genuine *koinōnia* partners in the mission.
 - **1 Peter 5:2-3** — Peter’s instruction to elders to “shepherd the flock of God among you... not lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” — mirrors the Diotrephes diagnosis from the positive side: the spirit of preeminence-seeking is the explicit counter-model to godly eldership; Peter’s instruction shows the canonical pattern that 3 John’s rebuke fits.
-

Aim

To call readers to examine their own pattern of life against the three portraits of 3 John — and to commit to the costly, truth-grounded, gospel-motivated hospitality and cooperation that Gaius embodies, while cultivating both self-suspicion about the Diotrephes spirit and courage to name it when it appears in Christian community.

Content Table

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
1	Greeting: “the Elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.”	“In truth” is not merely sincere — it carries full Johannine weight: love grounded in and shaped by the gospel truth.
2	John wishes Gaius well in all respects, including health, “just as your soul prospers.”	The comparison inverts the usual assumption — Gaius’s soul is the standard; his physical wellbeing is hoped to match it.
3-4	John rejoices to hear that Gaius “walks in the truth,” as his children do. His greatest joy is this.	First occurrence of “walking in truth” — the letter’s governing concept. Joy is not merely personal pride but eschatological delight in the advance of the gospel.
5-6	Commendation of Gaius’s faithful hospitality to “brethren, and strangers at that.” John urges him to “send them on their way in a manner worthy of God.”	“Strangers” emphasizes that Gaius’s hospitality is not merely social reciprocity — it extends to those he does not know personally. “Worthy of God” sets the standard: not minimal adequacy but generous, God-reflecting support.
7	The workers “went out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from the Gentiles.”	The missionary rationale: they are sustained entirely by the support of believers; there is no secular funding source. This makes Gaius’s hospitality essential, not

Verse(s)	Content	Notes
8	“Therefore we ought to support such men, so that we may be fellow workers with the truth.”	optional. The theological ground of gospel-missional hospitality: those who support missionaries become “fellow workers with the truth” — genuine missional partners.
9-10	Diotrephes: “loves to have the first place among them,” refuses apostolic correspondence, unjustly accuses “us with wicked words,” refuses to receive the brethren, and expels those who wish to show hospitality.	The portrait is detailed and specific — this is not a caricature but a diagnosis. Five distinct failures are listed, all rooted in the love of preeminence.
11	“Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.”	The explicit hinge of the letter’s application. Note: the criterion is not social likability but theological category — “of God” vs. “has not seen God.”
12	Demetrius commended by all, by the truth itself, and by John’s own testimony.	Triple commendation: community testimony, theological integrity, apostolic witness. Three witnesses — intentionally judicial.
13-14	John declines to write more — he hopes to see Gaius face to face. “Peace be to you. The friends greet you. Greet the friends by name.”	The personal, relational close: the letter is a provisional instrument; the relationship is the point. “By name” — pastoral specificity; individuals matter.

Divisions Table

Division	Verses	Label
----------	--------	-------

Division	Verses	Label
1	1-4	Greeting and First Joy: Walking in Truth as the Standard of Flourishing
2	5-8	The Gaius Portrait: Faithful, Other-Oriented, Gospel- Missional Hospitality
3	9-10	The Diotrephes Portrait: The Love of Preeminence as Gospel-Corrupting Poison
4	11-12	The Hinge and the Third Portrait: Imitate Good; Demetrius as Exemplar
5	13-14	Closing: The Sufficiency of the Letter and the Priority of Personal Fellowship

Subject Sentence & Primary Claim (*restated*)

Subject Sentence: Walking in truth means costly love for fellow laborers and resistance to self-serving leadership.

Primary Claim: God is calling His people to demonstrate the reality of their faith through concrete, gospel-motivated hospitality and cooperation — and to recognize that the love of preeminence is not merely a character flaw but a gospel-corrupting poison that must be named and resisted.

Applications (Five)

1. (Mind/Belief) Reframe what “gospel partnership” means. Most believers think of gospel support as something done by professionals — pastors, missionaries, sending agencies. Third John insists that the one who provides hospitality and material support to gospel workers becomes a “fellow worker with the truth” (v. 8). This is not volunteer work adjacent to the real mission — it is the mission. Every believer who supports, hosts, prays for, and sustains those engaged in gospel proclamation is a genuine participant in that proclamation. Examine whether you have mentally outsourced mission to others while positioning yourself as a passive observer. The text will not allow that category.

2. (Affections/Worship) Let John’s stated joy recalibrate what you most deeply desire. John writes that his greatest joy — not his satisfaction, not his pleasure, but his *greatest joy* — is to hear that his children walk in truth (v. 4). This is a statement about the shape of a

sanctified heart: its deepest delight is not personal comfort, ministry success, or even relational warmth, but the advance of the gospel in the lives of people. Where is your greatest joy located? If it is located primarily in your own comfort, security, or reputation, the text is diagnosing a disordered affection and calling it back to the shape of John's — and ultimately Christ's — joy.

3. (Will/Behavior) Identify one concrete, costly act of gospel-missional hospitality and do it. Gaius is not commended for his feelings about missionaries or his theological agreement with the mission. He is commended for what he *did* — he opened his home, extended his resources, and sent workers on their way “in a manner worthy of God” (v. 6). This is a behavioral call: name one concrete act of support — hosting a gospel worker, financially sustaining a missionary, providing material help to someone engaged in cross-cultural ministry — and execute it. The text is not asking for agreement; it is asking for action.

4. (Mind/Belief) Learn to diagnose the Diotrephes spirit — in community and in yourself. The Diotrephes portrait is not a curiosity about one difficult first-century church leader. It is a diagnostic tool placed in the canon for recurring use. The love of preeminence — the desire to be first, to control, to exclude those who threaten one's position — is a perennial corruption of Christian leadership and community. It appears in pastors, elders, small group leaders, committee chairs, and ordinary members. The text calls God's people not merely to avoid this spirit but to *recognize* it — to develop the discernment to name it when it appears, including in oneself. Ask honestly: where in your relationships, your ministry context, or your own heart does the love of preeminence operate?

5. (Affections/Worship) Cultivate a holy grief over leaders who corrupt the church through self-promotion. John's response to Diotrephes is not casual — he promises to “call attention to his deeds” when he comes (v. 10). This is not anger; it is pastoral grief expressed through disciplined accountability. The text calls God's people not to shrug at leadership corruption, not to excuse the love of preeminence as mere personality, but to grieve it as the serious gospel-corrupting evil it is. Develop a sanctified indignation at the damage done to Christ's church by leaders who use it as a platform for their own prominence — and let that grief produce both prayer for such leaders and courage to support those who call them to account.

Theological Importance

Theological Importance: Third John teaches that the invisible reality of one's relationship with God is made visible through concrete, other-oriented deeds — specifically through the costly support of those engaged in gospel work. The letter grounds this in the Johannine concept of “walking in truth”: truth is not merely held cognitively but enacted relationally and materially. The letter also provides a canonical case study in the theology of leadership: the love of preeminence is not merely a pastoral failure but a theological one —

“the one who does evil has not seen God” (v. 11). This places the Diotrephes spirit in the gravest possible category. Conversely, those who do good are “of God” — their deeds are evidence of genuine divine regeneration and indwelling. The letter insists that the quality of Christian community — its hospitality, its cooperation, its reception of gospel workers — is a theological datum, not merely an organizational one.

Reformed Theological Significance

Reformed Theological Significance: Third John is a compressed but powerful expression of the Reformed understanding that true faith is always living and active — that the elect, regenerate believer will inevitably produce the fruit of love toward the brethren, support for the gospel, and submission to truth-grounded authority. The commendation of Gaius is not a call to earn standing through hospitality; it is a description of what a soul that “prosper” (v. 2) in the truth naturally produces. The Diotrephes diagnosis reinforces the Reformed conviction that indwelling sin corrupts even those in positions of church leadership — and that the church requires both the accountability of the apostolic word and the courage of godly members to resist self-serving power. The letter’s grounding of application in gospel truth rather than bare imperative (“for the sake of the name,” v. 7; “fellow workers with the truth,” v. 8) reflects the Reformed insistence that all Christian obedience flows from gospel motivation, not from law-keeping or social expectation. The letter also affirms the unity of the visible and invisible church: those who walk in truth, support gospel workers, and receive the apostolic word are demonstrating the marks of genuine covenant membership.

Main Takeaway

The way you treat gospel workers, the posture you take toward those engaged in mission, and the spirit in which you exercise whatever influence or position you hold in Christian community — these are not incidental details of your Christian life. They are the evidence of whose you are. Walk in truth. Support those who go out “for the sake of the name.” And whenever you feel the pull to make it about your own position, your own reputation, or your own place at the front of the room — recognize that pull for what the text calls it: the spirit of Diotrephes, a spirit that has not seen God.

Preaching/Teaching Pitfalls

- **Reducing the letter to a lesson on general hospitality.** The hospitality commended in 3 John is not generic social warmth — it is specifically and deliberately missional: the support of traveling gospel workers who “went out for the sake of the name” (v. 7). Teaching that reduces Gaius’s example to “be more welcoming at church” has moved the application off the text. The text is calling for

active, costly, concrete partnership in the advance of the gospel — materially sustaining those who go. Preachers must name this specificity, not soften it.

- **Treating Diotrephes as a curiosity rather than a diagnostic tool.** It is tempting to treat the Diotrephes section as historical background — “there was a difficult man in that church” — without pressing its diagnostic force on the contemporary congregation. But the text places the Diotrephes portrait in the canon precisely because it is a recurring pattern. Every congregation has experienced leaders or members who love to have the first place. Preaching must name this clearly and call the congregation both to resist it and to examine themselves for it.
- **Moralistic application: “Be like Gaius, not like Diotrephes.”** This is the Clowney anti-moralism warning in its purest form. If the sermon’s application reduces to “imitate the good guy, avoid the bad guy,” it has failed to ground the application in the gospel. The text itself provides the ground: Gaius acts “for the sake of the name” (v. 7); the workers go out as “fellow workers with the truth” (v. 8); John’s joy is in the advance of the gospel (vv. 3-4). Applications must be tethered to this gospel-motivating logic, not to the moral attractiveness of Gaius as a character.
- **Neglecting the ecclesiological weight of the letter.** Third John is often treated as a purely personal letter with only interpersonal applications. But the letter is deeply ecclesiological: it addresses the health, authority structures, and missional cooperation of the local church. The Diotrephes situation is a church order problem with apostolic implications — John intends to address it in person (v. 10). Preaching must not strip the letter of its ecclesiological weight by over-personalizing it.
- **Failing to press the “fellow workers with the truth” identity on ordinary members.** Verse 8 offers a remarkable identity to those who support gospel workers: they become “fellow workers with the truth.” This is not a footnote — it is a claim about what ordinary believers are doing when they sustain missionary and gospel work. Preaching that focuses entirely on the Gaius/Diotrephes contrast without pressing this identity claim on the congregation has missed one of the letter’s most motivating affirmations. Ordinary members need to hear that their support makes them genuine participants in the mission — not merely spectators of it.
- **Using Demetrius’s commendation only as a transition device.** Demetrius (v. 12) receives a triple commendation — from the community, from “the truth itself,” and from John. This triple witness structure is intentionally judicial (echoing Deuteronomy 19:15 and the pattern throughout John’s Gospel). It is not merely a nice word about a courier — it is an authoritative apostolic endorsement designed to secure Demetrius’s reception by Gaius and the community. Preaching that treats this verse as a transitional mention misses its structural and theological function as a formally weighted commendation.

*Output file: **64 3 John 01.docx***