

NEW TESTAMENT POSTCARDS

A POSTCARD OF CANDID TRUTH

3 JOHN



The Heart of the Matter

If we could only return to the days of the first-century church—a much more simple, authentic time in the church! That’s what many struggling saints think today. But the idea behind such a comment is idealism, thinking that the early churches were free from disagreement and as doctrinally pure as the driven snow. That simply was not the case. An honest look shows Corinth as a church shot through with conflict, Colossae and Galatia as churches struggling with doctrinal error, Laodicea as lukewarm in its affection for Christ, Jerusalem as struggling with financial constraints, and Thessalonica as indifferent, not to mention the hypocritical Hebrews in the days of James. But perhaps we can find the best snapshot of the situation in the first-century church in John’s third letter. We will also see a reflection of modern-day churches as we examine these fourteen verses.



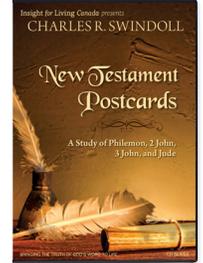
Discovering the Way

1. Comparison with Second John

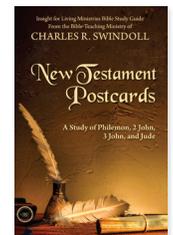
Second John	Third John
To: Written to a lady and her kids	To: Written to Gaius, whom John loved
Problem: The lady exercised misguided hospitality by receiving heretical teachers.	Problem: A man, Diotrephes, refused hospitality to true Christians.
Need: The lady needed God’s truth to balance her love.	Need: Diotrephes needed love to balance out truth.



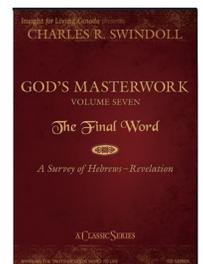
Tools for Digging Deeper



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New Testament Postcards:
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2. Analysis of Third John (3 John 1–14)

John addressed his third letter to a beloved friend, Gaius. John praised Gaius for walking in truth (3 John 3), for his faithful love for the brethren, and for his generous hospitality even to strangers (verses 5–6). John reminded Gaius that itinerant preachers needed the support of Christians, who had a moral obligation to provide for these faithful workers (verses 7–8).

In the next section of his letter, John criticized Diotrephes, a man who had kept his pagan name meaning, “Zeus-reared.” Diotrephes was selfish, refused to accept John and other itinerant preachers with hospitality, and openly slandered John (verses 9–10). John promised to come and deal with this evil man.

John concluded his letter by commending Demetrius for his faithfulness to Scripture and for the good report John had heard about him from the community.



DOORWAY TO HISTORY

Hospitality in the Ancient World¹

In the ancient world, hospitality toward a traveler was considered one of the most significant acts of service. Hospitality involved not just giving the traveler a bed for the night but also food and drink. Sharing a meal, in particular, united people in friendship as one gave from his or her own possessions to sustain the life of another. Sharing a meal also had significance in the Jewish and Christian traditions of the Bible.

We see an early biblical example in Abraham, who modeled hospitality in Genesis 18. However, the explicit reason for the Israelites to pursue hospitality came later, when the Lord commanded the people of Israel through Moses: “The stranger who resides with you shall be to you as the native among you, and you shall love him as yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt” (Leviticus 19:34). Hospitality, a solemn duty commanded by the Lord, reminded the Israelites where they had come from.

The New Testament continues the tradition of hospitality with John’s exhortations to his readers to provide for strangers and Christians who travel for the sake of the gospel (3 John 5–8). Paul also encouraged hospitality, as did the writer to the Hebrews. Most significantly, though, Jesus spoke of the fundamental importance of caring for those in need, including welcoming the stranger. Hospitality for others reminds believers that we, too, were once strangers, separated from God and in need of the care He provides.

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Starting Your Journey

As we seek to apply this postcard to our lives, we must recognize the four threads woven through the letter. Each thread represents a biblical virtue that should mark the life of every Christian:

- **Hospitality:** Genuinely caring for others
- **Generosity:** Genuinely giving to others
- **Honesty:** Genuinely sharing with others
- **Purity:** Genuinely clean in ourselves

Do you identify most with Gaius, Diotrephes, or Demetrius? Do you freely give of your time and resources to others?

ENDNOTE

1. Adapted from Insight for Living, "Third John," in *Insight's Handbook of New Testament Backgrounds: Key Customs from Each Book* (Plano, Tex.: IFL Publishing House, 2012), 113.