

Truth Triage

3 John 1:1 THE ELDER, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth: 2 Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. 3 For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth *that is* in you, just as you walk in the truth. 4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. (3 Jn. 1:1-4)

If you are an outsider coming to Christianity for the first time, you will find the variety rather bewildering. You find out there are around 1.3 billion Roman Catholics, and around 230 million Eastern Orthodox. There are around 900 million Protestants. These 900 million are split between historical Protestant groups: Lutheran, Reformed, Anglican, Baptist, and Methodist and some smaller groups, and modern Protestant groups: Pentecostal, non-denominational, African and Chinese independent churches. And within all these groups, you will find more variations on those groups. Why is this the case if we have according to Ephesians 4, one body and one Spirit, one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, (Eph. 4:4-6)

It's a natural question. But there are a few answers. The first is that the Bible is a long book, with a lot of truth and a lot of room for disagreement. The Bible is clear, but not all parts are equally clear. Disagreement is almost inevitable. A second reason is simply history. Over many years, all kinds of political, economic, and other events lead to more splits. For example, Anglicanism developed mostly because King Henry VIII wanted to divorce his wife and marry his mistress.

But a third reason has to do with what 3 John teaches: not understanding how to balance truth with love. God's people have a hard time maintaining balance between the truth and love for one another. Disagreements over what the Bible teaches test if we've understood how to do that. Jesus even predicted that because iniquity will abound, the "love of many will wax cold". Growing sin and immature selfishness tends to make the problem worse.

Second and Third John taken together deal with the problem of how love and truth are to balance each other out. You might remember we said that someone illustrated them as a train with railway tracks. Love is like the train and truth like the tracks. If you have love without truth, you have a train with no tracks, nothing to direct it, control it, and give it boundaries. On the other hand, if you have truth with no love, you have a railway track stretching into the distance, with nothing on it. Tracks, with no movement, no life, no action, no transport, no passengers.

The letter of 2 John was correcting a church that seemed to be running high on love, but low on truth. False teachers were knocking at their door and they were thinking of letting them in, showing them hospitality. Their love was becoming sentimental. It was lacking in boundaries, in convictions, in a clear understanding of loving in the truth, and because of the truth. They even lacked an understanding of the heart of Christian truth: the gospel, which is the boundary of the faith. So John taught them to treasure the truth, and let it be the train-tracks and guardrails of their love. They were in danger of truthless love.

But the letter of 3 John seems to deal with the opposite problem. Third John deals with truth without love. Loveless truth. Here the problem is not sentimentality, but brutality. Here truth has become an ideology, truth has become an idol, and the attitude has become tribal. There will be splits and divisions and more splits, because truth without love becomes proud and schismatic.

Third John may well have been part of a package of three letters. First John was a general letter to all the churches in the area that John ministered in, 2 John was a letter written to a particular church, and 3 John was written to a particular individual in a particular church, a man named Gaius.

Gaius seems to have been a member, and possibly a leader in one of the churches John wrote to. This church was apparently led by a man called Diotrephes. Diotrephes, whom we'll look at in more detail later on in this series, was a proud, controlling and cruel man. He wanted to be the sole ruler and controller of his church, and entered into a power struggle with people he disagreed with. He had gone so far as to even reject the apostle John and his authority. He would apparently gather people around himself and then slander others, including John, speaking maliciously against them. Church life had become politics and power struggles.

Now the interesting thing about Diotrephes is that John does not accuse him of false teaching. In 2 John, he highlights the false doctrine that some were bringing, denying the Incarnation of Jesus. But John rebukes Diotrephes entirely for his deeds: he speaks maliciously, he wants the preeminence, he won't receive others. In other words, Diotrephes is not failing to teach truth. The problem is not a lack of true doctrine. Diotrephes was failing to speak the truth in love. He failed to hold the truth in love.

There was plenty of truth in this church, but it appears there was not much love, at least not from Diotrephes. It's a very confusing thing if your spiritual leaders become malicious and cold and cliquish, especially because your pastors and leaders are teaching you the truth, and supposed to be modelling love. Gaius was probably very confused: on the one hand wanting to build the church, and submit to his leaders, but on the other hand, seeing a loveless leader pursuing petty church politics, and people being ostracised and kicked out unfairly and shamed. So John writes to reassure him that a real allegiance to the truth doesn't act that way. In fact, the summary statement of 3 John is verse 11: 11 Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. (3 Jn. 1:11)

Truth, when rightly applied, produces the good fruit of love. Truth, turned into an idol or a source for personal gain, produces the evil fruit of cruelty and unkindness.

So to explain how truth really behaves when grounded in love, John sets up two contrasts, which is really the main structure of the letter: the way Gaius does receive fellow-believers in verses 5-8 which is to be commended, and the way Diotrephes refuses to receive fellow believers in verses 9 and 10, which is to be condemned.

5 Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers, 6 who have borne witness of your love before the church. *If* you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well, 7 because they went forth for His name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. 8 We therefore ought to receive such, that we may become fellow workers for the truth. (3 Jn. 1:5-8)

Contrast that with how Diotrephes did not receive true Christians.

9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. 10 Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting *them* out of the church. (3 Jn. 1:9-10)

This shows that this word *receive* is an important word in 3 John. It is the way truth gets fleshed out: whom we receive, whom we recognise as fellow Christians, whom we fellowship with, and collaborate with. You can talk about defending the truth, learning the truth, knowing the truth, but in the end it gets worked out by whom we receive. We already saw in 2 John that you should not receive into Christian fellowship those who deny the gospel. But then it is possible to go too far and to not receive those who are in the faith, believing the gospel.

Third John then raises and begins to answer questions that affect all of us: since we want to be loyal to the truth, whom should we fellowship with? What missionaries should we partner with? What denominations or associations should we join or partner with? Whom should we fellowship with? How should I view that friend of mine in a charismatic church, or an Anglican church, or a Catholic church? Is it all the same, or all wrong? All equally wrong? Of course, that always raises the corollary: whom should we not partner with? What denominations or association should we not join?

Failing to understand 2 and 3 John causes people veer into two ditches. The one ditch are those people who say that if someone seems vaguely Christian, then we must fellowship with that person in every way, and on every level. They think if we share some truth and have fellowship on that level, then we should fellowship on every level and in every way. They're not like the church in 2 John allowing apostates into the church, but they're rather close, accepting almost anyone and everyone.

The other ditch are those people who decide that all truth is essential to any fellowship, and so if we differ in some way, then we differ in every way. It's all or nothing. If you get it wrong on some point, then you're wrong on every point, and they separate from you. This is what Diotrephes was like. Unless you agreed with him, and joined his tribe, and showed loyalty to him and his group, you were totally wrong, not even a Christian, and to be shunned, cast out, and not supported or acknowledged in any way.

But in this book, Gaius represents the balance. He is neither doing the sentimentalism of the church in 2 John, nor the arrogant tribalism of Diotrephes in 3 John. John writes to confirm that Gaius has found the balance: love with truth, but also truth with love.

He begins with a simple and warm greeting, pointing out that he knows Gaius is spiritually healthy.

3 John 1:1 THE ELDER, To the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth: 2 Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers.

He then says very similar words to what he said to the church in 2 John, that he knows Gaius is walking in truth.

3 For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth *that is* in you, just as you walk in the truth. 4 I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. (3 Jn. 1:3-4)

Now how did Gaius strike this balance that so few manage to get? Here is the truth that Gaius understood that Diotrephes did not.

All Truth is Important, But Not All Truth is Equally Important.

Everything the Bible says is the Word of God, which makes it worth more than all the gold and rubies and treasure of the world, according to Proverbs. But at the same time, the Bible itself tells you that some truths are more important, and will have more consequence to your life than others. For example, Jesus told the Pharisees

23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithes of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier *matters* of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.

24 "Blind guides, who strain out a gnat and swallow a camel! (Matt. 23:23-24)

There Jesus is saying, the truth about tithing has a certain level of importance, but the truths about justice, mercy and faith are weightier, or more consequential matters.

On the sermon on the Mount, Jesus used these words: **Mat 5:19** "Whoever therefore breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does and teaches them, he shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

There we again find out that commandments can be ranked from greatest to least. Some commandments are of smaller, less significance. Or consider the opposite case, when the scribe asked Jesus 36 "Teacher, which *is* the great commandment in the law?" 37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.'" (Matt. 22:36-37)

The Bible clearly has a way of weighing up some truth as being more important than others. If you can't make that judgement, or if you make it partially or inconsistently, you will veer towards becoming a 2 John sentimentalist, or a 3 John Diotrephes. Gaius, as we see in the first few verses, was willing to support and partner with certain believers. It's almost certain that Gaius didn't believe absolutely everything those Christians did on every point. But he had found fellowship enough to collaborate with them. Diotrephes on the other hand made it all-or-nothing all the time.

So how do we do this? A few years ago, a Christian leader used the analogy of triage. Triage is a technique used in medical emergencies. It was originally used in World War I to sort out those beyond help, to those needing urgent care, to those whose condition was serious but stable, and so on. It is still used today, in various forms. Especially in casualty or the emergency room, staff have to make a quick judgement of how serious someone's condition is. You have people coming in for all sorts of reasons: one person has an ingrown toenail that seems infected, another has a gunshot wound, another has a severe asthma attack, another has a broken leg. You can't treat them all with the same seriousness, because not all are as serious as others. Triage is from the French word *trier*, which means to sort. The triage officer must sort out which patients need the most urgent treatment, which are serious but can wait, and which are non-urgent.

Now Christians who want to walk in truth like Gaius, and not fall into loveless truth or truthless love, must learn a kind of doctrinal triage. We must learn how to diagnose the truth we hear, or the error we hear as to how serious it is, and what kind of response it deserves. Because the corollary of saying all truth is important but not all truth is equally important is to say all error is serious, but not all error is equally serious. If the error is on a hugely important doctrine then it is catastrophic, fundamental error. When the error is on an important doctrine with a lot of practical implications, then the error is serious, but not fatal. When the error is on something even less serious, it may even be what we call tolerable error.

Doctrinal triage is a matter of understanding Christian truth or doctrine, and putting it into one of three categories. Whether it's someone who wants to join our church, or someone who wants our support as a missionary, or a Christian teacher that you hear on the radio or TV or the web, or a church you're thinking of recommending to someone, or even understanding the differences between yourself and another professing believer, you should do this doctrinal triage to evaluate. Once you've done that, you know how much agreement, and how much disagreement you have with another professing Christian. And that, in turn affects how you fellowship with them, or how you might collaborate with them.

The first category is fundamental or essential doctrine. This is doctrine that is crucial to eternal life. This is the breathing and heartbeat of doctrinal triage. Fundamental doctrines are those teachings essential to becoming a Christian. We looked at this in 2 John when we studied the gospel as the

boundary of the faith. A doctrine which is necessary for the gospel is essential, fundamental. Doctrines necessary to make up the boundary of the faith that is the gospel: God's existence, human sinfulness, human inability, eternal punishment, Christ's deity, Christ's humanity, Christ's virgin birth and sinless life, Christ's substitutionary atonement, Christ's resurrection, ascension, and second coming, salvation by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

These are hills we die on. These are the truths that, when threatened, John uses the word antichrist, and Paul uses the word anathema or accursed.

Who is a liar but he who denies that Jesus is the Christ? He is antichrist who denies the Father and the Son. (1 Jn. 2:22)

8 But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed. 9 As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone preaches any other gospel to you than what you have received, let him be accursed. (Gal. 1:8-9)

The denial or the distortion of a fundamental is not a small thing. This is like finding a patient's airway is completely blocked, or the heart has totally stopped. It's life-threatening. Someone who denies these is not just in another denomination, he is not a Christian at all. On the other hand, when we find someone does believe these things, at minimum, we can call this person a professing Christian. We can extend mutual recognition, and say we think such a person is in the faith, a Christian, a born-again believer.

The second category is important or serious doctrine. This doctrine is not fundamental to becoming or being a Christian. If you differ on this, it is not apostasy or heresy. It is what we call heterodoxy. It's an error, but it does not mean you are outside the faith. But having said that, the secondary doctrines are important enough that they have fairly serious effects, particularly on church life. In medical terms this would be something serious: a broken bone, a bad infection, a real injury. Some examples: the meaning and mode of baptism, the meaning of the Lord's Supper, whether women can be pastors or elders of a church, whether you are a Calvinist or an Arminian, whether the supernatural gifts of prophecy and tongues still continue today, how a Christian should view the Law of Moses, the meaning and philosophy of worship, our understanding of the kingdom and the church and Israel, our view of psychology vs biblical counselling, our views of creation and evolution, how churches are to be governed.

Now these are important doctrines. If we differ on these, it is going to place a fairly severe limit on how much we can fellowship and in what ways we can partner. But it doesn't mean that someone who disagrees with me on these matters is not a gospel-believing Christian.

And if they are taught in an especially bad way, they can even come to endanger the fundamentals. Now you can get people who threaten the gospel with these teachings. For example, a person who starts saying baptism or speaking in tongues is necessary to be saved is now endangering the gospel. A person who starts claiming his view of election or free will is essential to salvation is endangering the gospel. But usually, differences here are in the category of serious differences that limit when and how we can fellowship or collaborate.

The third level are those doctrines which really do not affect church life or Christian living in any serious way. You can disagree with another Christian on this, and it hardly affects fellowship. For example, are we body, soul and spirit, or simply body and soul-spirit? Are our souls communicated to us from our parents, or does God create each one afresh? Are demons fallen angels or the disembodied spirits of Nephilim? Did Jesus die on Wednesday, Thursday or Friday? Who were the sons of God in Genesis 6? In my opinion, many of the details of eschatology are third-level

doctrines: the timing of the rapture, the number and timing of judgements, the identity of the Gentile kingdoms, or the nations in the Northern invasion.

But sadly enough, you'll find Christians spending large amounts of time disagreeing with others over these details, which missing the really fundamental and serious doctrines. That's a modern example of straining out gnats and swallowing camels. It would be like a nurse ignoring the man who is struggling to breathe, while attending to the boy who got a bee sting.

If we perform this doctrinal triage, we can fairly quickly locate where another church, teacher, ministry or Christian is relative to us. How will this help us?

If we do this, we can avoid becoming a Diotrephes. Someone like Diotrephes could use any doctrine, even third-level doctrines as a reason to separate from another. They turn every doctrine into a life or death matter.

Someone else like the church in 2 John could ignore major differences, even ones that are threatening the gospel, all in the name of unity and Christian love.

This take practice, and patient learning. But that's why John uses the term, "walking in truth". This is a life habit, not a once-off thing.

But Gaius did well. John says, "You do faithfully".