

2 & 3 JOHN

How to Use This Discussion Guide with Your Group

Start with a prayer, and then read the introduction from the sheet. Read the portion of the text from your Bible or an app (use whatever translation you're comfortable with, but we suggest the New Living Translation (NLT) or the English Standard Version (ESV)). Then read the summary paragraph(s) and talk through the questions for that section. You can work through this guide in one session or spread it out over several – whatever works for your group. As you read and discuss, consider how what you're reading applies to your life today. Don't forget to close with prayer!

INTRODUCTION TO 2 & 3 JOHN

John's 'second letter' is like a shorter version of his first letter. He writes to encourage Christians to love one another, and to warn them about the false teachers who are confusing the gospel message.

3 John is the shortest letter in the New Testament. It is from 'the elder' to a church leader named Gaius. The elder praises Gaius for the hospitality he has been giving to travelling preachers. He complains about a man called Diotrephes, who is being a nuisance, and commends someone called Demetrius.¹

THE ERRORS OF GNOSTICISM

One of the most dangerous heresies of the first two centuries of the church was Gnosticism. Its central teaching was that salvation is a product of knowledge; that spirit is entirely good and matter is entirely evil. From this unbiblical dualism flowed **five important errors**:

1. Man's body, which is matter, is there for evil. It is to be contrasted with God, who is wholly spirit and therefore good.
2. Salvation is escape from the body, achieved not by faith in Christ but by special knowledge (the Greek word for "knowledge" is *gnosis*, hence Gnosticism).
3. Christ's humanity was denied in two ways: (1) some said that Christ only *seemed* to have a body, a view called Docetism, from the Greek *dokeo* ("to seem"), and (2) others said that the divine Christ joined the man Jesus at baptism and left him before he died, a view called Cerinthianism, after its most prominent spokesman Cerinthus. This view is the background of much of 1 John (see 1:1; 2:22; 4:2-3).
4. Since the body was considered evil, it was to be treated harshly. This acetic form of Gnosticism is the background of part of the letter to the Colossians (2:21-23).

¹ Andrew Knowles, *The Bible Guide*, 1st Augsburg books ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 684.

5. Paradoxically, this dualism also led to licentiousness. The reason was that, since matter – and not the breaking of God's law – was considered evil, breaking this law was of no moral consequence.

The Gnosticism addressed in the New Testament was an early form of heresy, not the intricately developed system of the 2nd and 3rd centuries. In addition to that seen in Colossians and in John's letters, acquaintance with early Gnosticism is reflected in 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, to Peter and perhaps 1 Corinthians.

2 JOHN

A WARNING AGAINST DECEIVERS

Read 2 John 7–11.

This joyful letter also carries a warning. John warns his readers that they must not be deceived by false teachers.

The false teachers seem to be travelling from church to church. John says they are 'deceivers' who have gone out into the world – so perhaps they were members of the church at one time. Now they spread the lie that Jesus didn't really take on our 'flesh', or human nature. Instead, they say he was only pretending to be human, and didn't really suffer and die for our sins.

John warns the church not to believe such people, and not to invite them into their homes. He calls the deceiver 'the antichrist'. A false teacher is a part of Satan, just as a true believer is part of Christ.

John recommends that false teachers should be excluded. This is like Jesus telling his disciples to leave a hostile town (Luke 10:10). There must be a clear difference between those who welcome the truth and those who oppose it.²

1. How are John's twin themes of truth and love interconnected here?
2. If the lady addressed in this letter were to show hospitality to these false teachers who traveled around, would her error be on the side of truth, or on the side of love? What's wrong with welcoming such wandering missionaries?
3. How do John's exhortations to true believers (vv. 4-6) help them resist the deception and wickedness of the religious frauds (vv.7-11)?

² Andrew Knowles, [The Bible Guide](#) (1st Augsburg books ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 692.

4. Which is easier for you to do – “walk in truth” or “walk in love”?
5. Have you ever been involved in a deep relationship that had to be terminated because of an overriding issue involving your faith? What happened?
6. How do you distinguish between those missionaries you ought not to support and those you should? How can you exercise truth and love in that decision?
7. When was the last time you had someone over who was really hurting, lonely or needing help (no names)? Should you do this more often? What's stopping you?

3 JOHN

THE ELDER GREETS GAIUS

Read 3 John 1–4.

This is a personal letter—unlike 1 and 2 John, which are written to a group of people. The elder says that he has received good reports about Gaius, and knows that his soul is ‘getting along well’!

‘Diotrephes loves to be first’

Diotrephes is not a false teacher, but he is setting a bad example. The elder says Diotrephes ‘loves to be first’, which sounds as though he is pushing himself forward in the local church’s leadership. This is an evil attitude, which shows how little he knows about God.

THE ELDER COMMENDS HIM FOR HIS HOSPITALITY

Read 3 John 5–8.

Gaius has been giving hospitality to travelling preachers. Some of these may have come from the elder’s church, bringing his teaching and encouragement.

Giving hospitality means much more than providing a visiting preacher with food and offering a bed for the night. It means supporting visitors (who may be strangers) with enough money to live on. Gaius has done this for Jesus’ sake, just as his visitors are preaching the gospel for Jesus’ sake. Both are playing their part in the mission of Christ.

DIOTREPHEIS IS BEING DISRUPTIVE

Read 3 John 9–10.

The elder says that he has written to the church, but Diotrephes will have nothing to do with him. Diotrephes is a leader who is getting above himself. He is preventing the elder's letter from being read, spreading bad reports about him, rejecting his messengers and excluding his supporters.

DEMETRIUS IS TRUSTWORTHY

Read 3 John 11–12.

The elder mentions Demetrius as a good example. Everyone speaks well of him. Perhaps he is the one who has brought this letter from the elder to Gaius, to make sure it doesn't fall into the wrong hands.³

1. What conflicts were going on in the church that prompted John to write this letter? What personality issues are involved? What type of character sketch would you draw for Gaius?
2. In what ways does this letter tackle the hospitality issue differently than 2 John? Why is John urging that these teachers be cared for in their travels? Why would this be so important at this time?
3. How can you reflect Gaius's desire to be of help to itinerant Christian workers?
4. Has suspicions about the false motives or messages of some pastors/teachers soured you against them all? What needs to change so you will not hinder the work of God by failing to encourage his true servants?
5. Do you find opening up your home (or your small group) to new people easy or difficult? Why is that?
6. In picking close friends (like Gaius was to John), what do you look for? How can you be that kind of friend to others?

³ Andrew Knowles, [The Bible Guide](#) (1st Augsburg books ed.; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 2001), 692.