

2. True Gospel Ministry: Welcoming the genuine

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[0 : 0 0] Now, if I could ask you to turn, please, once again to page 1026 to 3rd John, and we'll have a moment of prayer before we look together at this letter.

God our Father, we praise you that you have given to us a living word. You have given to us a gospel to proclaim. And we pray, Lord, that as we look at this little letter today, we may not only hear it as a word once spoken, but as the living word for us today.

A word which will change us, a word which will challenge us, a word which will inspire us. We ask that this may be the result of our meeting together. In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our subject for these two little letters is true gospel ministry. And last week we looked at recognizing the fake in 2nd John. And this week we're going to look at welcoming the genuine in 3rd John.

Martin Luther once said, with his characteristically vivid imagery, that humanity is like a drunk man on a horse. When it falls off on one side, it gets up again and immediately falls off on the other side.

[1 : 2 6] The apostles are very, very well aware of our tendency to extremism. John, in his 2nd letter, is determined we're not going to be deluded by fakes.

That when people come claiming to bring the gospel, but in fact bring another gospel, that we must recognize them. But John is also aware of another tendency. That once we've done that, then we may spend so long identifying fakes.

So long hereting out heresy. That we will never give a true welcome to genuine gospel ministry. And that's what this 3rd letter is concerned with.

How do we recognize, how do we know, how do we support genuine gospel ministry? Now, the 2nd letter was addressed, as we saw, to the so-called elect lady, whom we suggested was not in fact an individual, but a group of churches.

Perhaps the 7 churches in the book of Revelation, for whom John the Apostle was particularly responsible, and which he had a particular concern with. Here we are addressing a named individual, Gaius, the elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in the truth.

[2 : 3 9] Commentators spend many pages telling us which of the three Gaiuses mentioned in scripture this might have been. It's a fairly pointless exercise, because there is no way of telling.

And Gaius was a very, very common name in the first century. All we know about him is he is a leader in John's circle of churches. And there are two other individuals, Diotrephes and Demetrius, who we'll come to in due course.

So John addresses this letter to this man, Gaius, who is responsible as a leader for the gospel ministry in the churches. Now, remember the situation where at the end of the apostolic age, the apostles are bowing out.

Peter and Paul have already gone. John is probably the last apostle left on earth alive. And the real concern is, how is the church going to remain apostolic?

How is the church going to remain a gospel church when the apostles have gone? Concern of the Paul as well in 2 Timothy, the concern of Peter in his second letter, and the concern of Jude.

[3 : 52] How are we going to recognize fakes? Because these fakes come in very attractive guise, and the devil deceives us. But you know, we have a very, very clever enemy.

And as I say, when we recognize the fake, we must not fall into the opposite extreme of failing to welcome the genuine. This is sometimes caricatured in this way.

There's only two of us left now in the church. My wife and myself, and I'm not very sure about her. Have you ever met Christians like that? Ultra-reformed, who have absolutely no time for anybody who does not dot every I, cross every T, and speak the particular shibboleths of that group.

You see, when we become obsessed with recognizing the fake, we're in danger. Because we're in danger of forgetting why we have to recognize the fake.

Why do we have to recognize the fake? We have to recognize the fake so that we know the genuine. Recognizing the fake is never an end in itself. It's never enough to point out somebody is a false teacher.

[5 : 06] What we need to do, then, is to make room for true teaching, for genuine teachers. I want to suggest that one of the ways we know we've gone too far in that direction is when it becomes an obsession.

When it becomes something that is so much part of us that we no longer are concerned about hearing good and gospel ministry. And the other aspect of this, and we'll come to that when we come to verses 9 and 10, is when it becomes personal.

When we reject teachers, not because they are genuine, but because we don't like them. We don't like their personality. We don't like their manner. And John is warning us against that in this unpleasant individual, Diotrephes.

So last week, then, we saw how we recognize the false teacher. Those who present a false Christ, who is not the biblical Christ, who died and rose again, and will come again on the last day.

Those who offer false progress, which actually takes us away from Christ, and is not progress, but apostasy, falling away from the faith. And those who come under false pretenses.

[6 : 15] Those who come offering us something new, something exciting, but in fact have nothing to give us at all. Now, two words are used here about genuine gospel ministry.

Verse 8, John says, we must support people like these. Support in its widest sense, support financially, with fellowship, all kinds of ways.

We need to support genuine gospel ministry. But verse 10 goes a little further. We must welcome them. We must have a warm, open heart for such people.

And when that happens, John says in verse 8, we may become fellow workers for the truth. True gospel ministry is always a partnership. True gospel ministry is always a united effort, isn't it?

I want to suggest to you now, there are three ways in which John tells us we may recognize the genuine. First of all, the genuine gospel minister will come with a Christ-centered ministry.

[7 : 18] That's particularly verse 7. Secondly, the genuine gospel minister will come with apostolic authority.

Verse 9, Diotrephus does not accept our authority, says the apostle John. And thirdly, the genuine gospel minister's work will have lasting fruit.

I'm going to develop that when we look at verses 11 and 12. This word good is a significant word. I'm going to suggest that means has lasting, abiding fruitfulness.

So first of all, their ministry is God-centered. Verse 7, they have gone out for the sake of the name. What marks a genuine gospel worker?

They don't particularly emphasize church and organization. They emphasize instead the name which is above every name. The name of our salvation.

[8 : 17] Now you see how important it is to recognize the fake. That's why John says this in his second letter. Because anyone who preaches, any minister is going to say, I come in the name of Christ.

I preach Christ. I preach the gospel. But, as we know from both the first and the second letter, that must be the true biblical Christ. The Christ who is one with God and became one of us.

The Christ who died for us and for our salvation. The Christ who arose again and ascended to the right hand of the Father. The Christ who sent the Spirit. And who will come on the last day to judge the living and the dead.

And all this, I think, is encapsulated in this. They went out for the sake of the name. The name of God reminding us of the name of Yahweh.

The name of Israel's God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ. See, there are an awful lot of people who will say they are Christ-centered and are preaching Christ.

[9 : 20] And that their heartland is expository preaching. Look at their priorities. Look at their diaries. Look at their agendas. And they tell a different story. You see, many people will say they support genuine gospel work.

When it actually, when push actually comes to shove, you find they're supporting something else. After all, it's what people do. It's not what they say they're doing that matters. It's not whether people say, I have a biblical ministry.

I have a gospel ministry. My heartland is expository preaching. It's whether they actually do that. It's whether that's what they spend their energy on.

Whether that's what they are about. Paul says this in 2 Corinthians 4. We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus, our Lord.

No, it was a great temptation to preach ourselves. Maybe not ourselves personally, but our church, our organization, and so on.

[10 : 24] We preach not ourselves, but Christ. Wesley summed up his ministry by saying this, I offered Christ to them. What are we offering to the people of Glasgow?

What are we offering to the world? We have nothing else that will change lives and transform communities, but Christ himself. Because ultimately, the gospel is not about Christ.

The gospel is Christ. The living word of God made flesh, to whom the written word so fully and faithfully points. Which is why we believe that when the Bible is opened, Christ is revealed in all his power to change the church and to convert the world.

And that's the link. We cannot do this without scripture. We cannot do it without the preaching of scripture. Otherwise, our Christ simply becomes a figure of fantasy.

That is why preaching that is Christ-centered is also biblical-centered. There is no contradiction between these two. They are Christ-centered. The word they preach is the living word made flesh.

[11 : 33] And they preach the scriptures. And they also, we are told in verse 7, accept nothing from the Gentiles. This doesn't mean they refuse generosity. It means as a matter of policy, they are supported by God's people.

If they are going out for the sake of the name, then those who own and honor and love that name must support them. That's what John is saying. God's work needs the support of God's people.

And gospel ministry is never a one man or even a several man or woman band. A gospel work is the concern for all God's people. That's the first thing then.

Gospel ministry is shown by its Christ-centeredness. Christ at the center. Christ driving the agenda. I offered Christ to them, said Wesley.

That would be a wonderful epitaph to have for a gospel minister. I offered Christ to them. Secondly, their ministry has apostolic authority. Verse 9, I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority.

[12 : 45] Now, some of the commentators say the aging apostle, John, is being petulant. He doesn't like new people disagreeing with him. That's a total misunderstanding. John is not talking about himself as an individual.

John is talking about himself as an apostle, as one to whom the word of God has been revealed. And this is the true apostolic succession.

People sometimes talk about the apostolic succession, the successors of Peter, upon whom hands have been laid throughout the centuries. And they are the true successors of the apostles.

Sometimes in some charismatic circles, we hear of new apostles who come to give the church new truth. That's not how the New Testament sees apostolic authority and apostolic succession.

How is the church to be apostolic once the apostles have passed on? The church will be apostolic as the preachers of the gospel continue to preach the apostolic gospel.

[13 : 48] That is the apostolic succession. We don't have apostles nowadays, but we do have and we do need apostolic ministry. Ministry built on the apostles and the prophets.

Acknowledging here the authority of John and of the other apostles, who in turn acknowledge the authority of the prophets. And the passage in 2 Peter I referred to last week, where Peter says, the words from heaven.

Interesting, when Peter says, I heard a word from heaven, that word from heaven quotes the Old Testament, Isaiah 42 and Psalm 2. So if some guy comes along and says, I've got a voice from heaven, we say, good for you.

So do we. Here is the voice from heaven. The words of the apostles and the prophets. The gospel, what the faith once delivered to the saints. And it's not just believing this, it's passing it on that matters.

You go back to the Old Testament, to the days of Joshua. You read the last chapter of Joshua, and you read this. The people obeyed the word of the Lord all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who outlived Joshua.

[15 : 01] In other words, see what happened. Moses had trained Joshua. Joshua, in turn, trained the other leaders. But after they had gone, something had gone wrong, and what had gone wrong was that they had failed to train the next generation.

Read on into the book of Judges and find the grotesque chaos that results. There's an appalling situation where you get to the last chapters of Judges, where you have a kind of chapter you can scarcely read in public about gang rape and all the rest of the things.

What had happened? The word of God was no longer honoured and obeyed. Similarly, Paul says to Timothy, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.

How do we defend, preserve, maintain, be faithful to the apostolic gospel? Not by putting it in a glass case and saying, look, isn't this wonderful? We maintain, we defend the apostolic gospel by passing it on.

That's really the importance of ventures like Cornhill in our own little way. That's what we're trying to do, to pass on the gospel to the next generation of teachers. It's not enough to have it.

[16 : 15] We must pass it on. Pass it down the generations. And so often you see this, places where there was once flourishing gospel ministries, which no longer, sometimes in some cases, no longer exist.

Other cases, they've gone liberal. In other cases, they've simply ossified and kept on in the language and the idiom of earlier generations and not communicating with everybody.

I was brought up on the east nuke of Fife on a small fishing village. In my grandfather's generation in the early decades of the 20th century, there was quite a revival swept through the fishing ports right down to Lowestoft and Grimsby and right up to the northeast fishing ports, associated particularly with Jock Troop, an evangelist, who preached in these fishing ports and saw many, many people turning to Christ.

The result was, in many of these fishing ports, flourishing communities of Christians grew up. And in the place where I was brought up, that was no exception. Indeed, there were so many churches there, which used to be called the Holy City, not because of the sanctity of the inhabitants, but because of the number of places of worship.

Tragedy was, by the time I was a boy and a young man, these places had largely gone, or if they hadn't gone, they were simply living in the past.

[17 : 41] They were no longer sharing the living word with new generations. See, this is what we must do. Each generation must pass it on to the next generation and so on until the Lord returns.

That is the true apostolic succession. That is a ministry that has apostolic authority. The non-negotiable truth, the deposit that's passed down the generations.

But that has to be, that has to be shared with every generation in ways they can understand. And that has to be passed on from one generation to the other. But the other thing about apostolic authority, and that brings us to the rest of verses 9 and 10.

Apostolic authority is not dominated by personal considerations of liking and disliking. There is such a thing as chemistry. There is such a thing as getting on with some people better than others and we recognize that.

That's not what John is talking about. John is talking about this man, Diotrephes, another leader in the church who likes to put himself first. Interesting phrase.

[18 : 51] The old version interestingly says, Diotrephes loves to have the preeminence. Now, in Colossians 1 verse 18, Paul says, Christ in all things is to have the preeminence.

See what this man is doing. He wants to be first and he is trying to suppress those who place Christ at the center of their ministry. See, if Christ is going to have the preeminence then Diotrephes can't have it.

If Christ is going to be at the center then others can't be. You see what's happening here. Diotrephes is not in the least interested in gospel ministry. He's not the least interested in whether these preachers are preaching Christ.

All he's interested in is that he is number one, that he talks wicked nonsense against John, against the other apostles, and refuses to welcome the brothers.

So often true gospel work is opposed because men want prominence. They want their names on letterheads. They want to be in positions in churches and in organizations and that's all they're concerned with.

[20 : 01] They're not concerned with Christ and his message to the world. When that happens to any church or organization, they've lost the gospel because the gospel is about Christ being at the center.

The gospel is about bowing to the authority of the apostles. There's a third thing and final thing now. Gospel ministry is fruitful in the long term.

If you wonder where I get there, that's verses 11 and 12. Let me explain what I mean. Beloved, says John, do not imitate evil, but imitate good. Whoever does good is from God.

Whoever does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has received a good testimony from everyone and from the truth itself. There's another individual, Demetrius, probably one of the faithful gospel ministers whom Diotrophes had tried to expel from the church.

And it is possible that John fears that even Gaius himself might be taken in by this. What is Diotrophes doing? He's talking wicked nonsense.

[21 : 09] Gossip is a dangerous and deadly thing. Gossip destroys gospel work. And that's what John fears here. So John says Demetrius and others like him does good.

For us, good is a very vague word. We use it about anything we happen to like. When the word good is used in the Bible, all was behind it is Genesis 1 and 2, where over and over again, the created order is described as good or as very good.

In short, something that is good is something that is what God intended it to be. A good work, after all, Paul says, the one who began a good work will continue it until the day of Jesus Christ.

And gospel work is good work because gospel work is producing the kind of people and the kind of churches that God intended them to be.

When you think of that and so many other uses of the word good, Joseph at the end of his, not at the end of his life, but the end of his appalling experience of betrayal and imprisonment said, God meant it for good.

[22 : 23] In other words, as God works through all these circumstances, good, his own purpose, is achieved. And Romans 8, all things work together for good.

Many, many things that happen are anything but good. They're awful, they're terrifying. Nevertheless, God works everything for good. So, you see what John is saying?

John is saying Demetrius and these other genuine gospel preachers, their work lasts. And their work lasts because it is the work of the Spirit of God who creates, who renews, who redeems, and who works everything out for God's purposes.

It may not appear to succeed, but if it is a genuine gospel work, it will succeed. As Spurgeon said, the gospel must succeed. The gospel will succeed.

It cannot be prevented from succeeding, and that's because it's God's work. And that's why, isn't it, that at the end, what the genuine gospel church longs to hear is, well done, good, and faithful servant.

[23 : 30] And a good servant is one like Demetrius, who has done the work of the Lord. So, it's fruitful, and it has integrity. And let's just a few words about the word truth, which is used so often.

Demetrius, verse 12, has received a good testimony from everyone, and from the truth itself. In other words, it's not just that Demetrius is commended by others.

His work has an integrity, a gospel character, which shows it is of God. And that echoes what John has said to Gaius back in verses 1 to 4.

Notice the number of times he uses the word truth there. For I rejoiced greatly when the brothers came and testified to your truth, as you are indeed walking in truth.

I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in truth. You see, the letter hangs together. What term John is speaking about is that inner integrity which marks the person as someone whom God is doing a good work in, and which marks a church as a gospel church.

[24 : 46] That's what truth is, what makes spiritual life healthy. In verse 2, John has said, Beloved, I pray that all may go well with you, may be in good health as it goes well with your soul.

Gaius' soul is healthy, it's godly, it's good, and John prays therefore that his body may also enjoy that. You see, gospel ministry is ultimately a matter of life and death.

Fake ministry will lead to the destruction of churches. Fake ministry will lead to the unconverted never hearing the true gospel.

But genuine ministry will lead to health and well-being. Not in the sense that we'll be necessarily healthy in this world. Gaius presumably is not all that well at the moment, which is why John prays he'll be healthy as his soul is.

A gospel church is a church that's full of fit and healthy people. Not fit and healthy physically, but fit and healthy in that the spirit of God is working in them.

[25 : 56] Christ is at the centre of their lives and they're sharing that same Christ with others. Many years ago, and in fact turning back in the 30s and 40s, there was a New Testament scholar and preacher at Edinburgh University called T.W.

Manson. He used to begin his classes every session asking people who were there to train for the ministry and in those days nearly everybody in those classes would be.

He asked them, what is the purpose of the ministry? And he would give many answers, of course, some of them better than others. But he would always himself give his answer at the end of the session.

And he would say this, the purpose of the ministry is to fit people for heaven. Brothers and sisters, that's what genuine gospel ministry is about.

It is about fitting people for heaven. Let's welcome that ministry. Let's support that ministry. Let's be fellow workers for the truth.

[27 : 01] Amen. Let's pray. God our Father, we praise you for the gospel, which is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

And we want to commit ourselves both as individuals and as a fellowship to that kind of gospel ministry that will indeed fit people for heaven. We want to see people converted.

We want to see people grow and grace. Above all, we want to see the name of the Lord Jesus Christ honored. Amen.