

Treating Strangers Right • 3 John 5–8

Several summers ago our family attended a worship service in a small country church. There were six from our family, as well as four from another Wooddale family. The ten of us arrived and added our numbers to the regular congregation of that church which was about 40, so there were 40 of them and 10 of us. The only reason I mention the numbers is to say that they must have noticed that we were there.

We arrived shortly before the service started. We went in; we asked for a bulletin; we found our way to seats; we went through the worship service. Afterwards we milled around a bit in conversation with ourselves, and then left.

The most memorable part of that particular Sunday was the fact that no one said even one word to us, not even hello. No one initiated any conversation at all.

What that church needed is what every church needs, and that's someone named Gaius.

I have decided that one of the books of the Bible is misnamed. There are lots of books in the Bible that were written by Paul, so we have Galatians and Ephesians and Philippians and Colossians and I and II Thessalonians and I and II Timothy and Titus. Whoever decided to name these books didn't name them I Paul and II Paul and III Paul and IV Paul and V Paul and VI Paul, right?

However, they switched the rules, whoever was doing this back whenever it was done, and somebody came along and took John's letters and named them I John and II John and III John. This is not only unreasonable and illogical, but when you consider the fact that John already had one of the biggest books in the New Testament named after him, it was patently unfair. So I have been working on the publication of a "New Anderson Revised Version of the Bible". I intend to scrap the name of III John and I have renamed that book "Gaius". It doesn't have a ring to it at first, but after awhile you sort of get used to it.

I invite you look with me in your Bibles at "Gaius" 5-8 and the words that are there recorded:

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. You will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to

show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.

Now this Gaius (to whom this book sometimes "miscalled" III John was addressed) was really a great guy. He was the kind of person that every church should have because he treated strangers right. And that is a vital part to the life and the ministry of any church. Surely one of the most practical ways of checking out someone's Christianity is to see the way someone treats other Christians, treats other people.

John has already established in this little letter, the shortest in the New Testament, that Gaius walked in the truth. He's made that clear. It's also clear that they are friends, so I think that we may assume that Gaius treated John well, treated him Christianly. But the point here is hospitality, and Gaius showed hospitality to strangers.

The Romans gave some wonderful gifts to the Mediterranean world. They gave them what is called the Pax Romana which is the Roman peace, so all these warring tribes and ethnic groups that had been killing each other off for centuries were put at peace simply because the Romans ruled and the Roman peace came. They also gave this grand network of good and safe roads. They gave a universal language, surprisingly not their own language of Latin, but the language of Greek, which became the trade language for the entire Roman Empire. All of this made travel and trade very easy. As a result, people traveled around the Mediterranean world as they had never traveled before in history. We see that in the records of history, but we also read often of that within the New Testament, particularly in the book of Acts. It's surprising how freely and readily people traveled.

But because there was no good commercial lodging system, there was something missing to go along with this transportation network. Part of the Greek

culture had disdain for anyone who accepted money for hospitality. That may seem strange in comparison to our culture where we have such an elaborate network of hotels and motels and bed and break-

fast places. People readily accept money for lodging. But in those days, in that culture, the Greeks said you simply don't accept money for entertaining somebody overnight.

I suppose you might make a comparison to the Japanese culture where tipping is unacceptable. While it is so much a part of our culture, it is not acceptable there. That meant, then, that the Greeks

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very much looked down on anyone who accepted money for hospitality. They, therefore, looked down on innkeepers. They were considered very low in the ranking of society.

As a result, travelers were forced to establish elaborate networks of systems and places to stay. Much of it was done through family systems. So, for example, a family that was based in Alexandria might have a relative that would move to Rome or to Athens or to Jerusalem, and the large extended family would house one another as they traveled. Or people in business would write ahead to distant offices or to clients, sometimes they would even send references, all necessary, in advance, to make the arrangements so they would have a place to stay.

Some cities actually went so far as to establish an ancient Roman equivalent to our traveler's aid, where there would be a place that you could go in the city and you would say that you were an out-of-town visitor and you needed a place to stay. They would then give you the names and the addresses of those who would provide hospitality free because it was not acceptable to take money.

Well, Christians quickly established networks of their own. They got to know each other. The churches were aware of one another. We see that in the New Testament as names were written back and forth in the various New Testament letters. Especially in the case of missionaries and evangelists who traveled from place to place in proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ, they stayed with other Christians.

So, for example, Paul's letter to the Galatians is not to a specific place, like his letter to the Corinthians, but rather it is to the province of Galatia. As they sought to evangelize that province, they would know where there would be a few Christians or one or two churches. That, then, became the beachhead, in a sense, from which they would strike out in the establishment of new churches and winning other people to Jesus Christ. If there were strangers there and they didn't know them in advance, they also brought letters of introduction and letters of reference from their home churches or other churches where they had been. It was a very important aspect of advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Just as the Pax Romana and the road system and the Greek language were vital elements greatly used by the Holy Spirit to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ, so was this system of hospitality. What Gaius did was that he opened his home to these strangers who were, according to verse 5, Christians. They were not just anyone.

And Gaius was different than some. For example, if you look ahead a little bit into verse 9, you see the name of a man named Diotrephes who refused to open his home to a stranger who really wasn't much of a stranger at all, the Apostle John himself. Diotrephes wouldn't allow John to stay in his home.

In those days, long before Burger King had the slogan We Treat You Right, Gaius treated his guests royally. So it wasn't just a matter that he did it, but that he gave them this extraordinarily good treatment. He loved them; he loved these strangers, these guests who came his way and who stayed in his home.

Love is exactly the right word. In Greek the word that we translate in our English Bible as hospitality is the Greek word *xenophilia* and its made up of two Greek words, the Greek word *xenos* which means stranger and the Greek word *philia* which means love. So *xenophilia* was the love of strangers. And that's exactly how Gaius is described, as exercising hospitality or loving strangers.

As you look at the letter that John wrote to him, I want you to notice a few ways in which that love was demonstrated. You notice, for example, that he sent them on their way. Interesting words that John chose, words used elsewhere in the New Testament typically to describe the sending out of missionaries. I suspect that's exactly how the words are here being used. In other words, he didn't just provide a guestroom, a place in the basement or upstairs overnight, and then they got on their way themselves the next morning. Rather, he sent them on their way. He provided for them. He made sure they had adequate provisions so that wherever they would go next, they would have the food they needed, perhaps even the money that was necessary.

And the quality, the way he did it in terms of sending people on their way, especially missionaries, evangelists, and apostles, was that he did it in a manner worthy of God. So it was better than Burger King, better than treating them royally; he treated them divinely. He treated them as he would have treated God himself had God been a guest in his home staying there that night before.

Now I think most of his guests probably were missionaries. They were people like the apostles Peter and John and Paul. And he treated them, I suspect, as if it was Jesus Christ who had been his guest. What a marvelous prospective for anyone who exercises hospitality. It's a model for us as we entertain missionaries and provide for them, that they should be treated right while they are with us.

But they also need to be sent off in a way that is royal, that is divine. They need adequate care, adequate provision. They should have excellent pay, and all the things that are necessary. We should treat other people, and especially those who are communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ, in the same way that we would treat Jesus himself if he were our guest.

Gaius had some clear reasons why he did this. The main reason was not benevolence; the main reason was not so much doing right; the main reason certainly wasn't the tax deductibility of his gifts. What mainly motivated Gaius was the Name, capitalized in most of our versions of the Bible, the Name of

Jesus Christ.

Some years ago when we lived in Colorado, we had a good friend who lived there too. Bob Hershey owned a plumbing and heating contracting company. When I had projects that needed more transportation than our car or station wagon could provide, Bob would graciously let me borrow his truck.

One time he lent me his beautiful Chevy truck. It was air conditioned and had an AM-FM radio and automatic transmission; it was a beautiful vehicle. I can hardly imagine putting tools in it and using it for plumbing and heating contracting, but apparently he carefully did.

While using his truck, I came to a highway that runs north and south through Colorado. I needed to get to the other side of the highway to get on to my destination. There was a lot of traffic going too fast for me to get across. I waited and I waited and I watched these cars go by and I did precisely what you have done. I started judging the spaces between the cars speeding by and I thought, "I could have gotten through there if I had been quick enough."

After what seemed to be a very long wait, I saw a space coming. At the time it seemed like an adequately large space, and so I got ready. When the one car went by, I floored it and went out and across the highway to the other side.

I did make it; it was an adequate space. However, the next fellow didn't think it was an adequate space and he did a number of things; he honked, he gestured, and I saw his mouth moving. I'm grateful that I didn't hear the precise words he said.

When I returned the truck, I foolishly told this story to Bob Hershey and he took it a little more seriously than I did. He said to me, "Leith, remember that my name is on the driver's door of that truck." I thought he'd be concerned about smashing up his Chevy truck, but what he was most concerned about was that it said Hershey Plumbing and Heating. That's what was mainly in view of the guy that was honking his horn and gesturing and saying those terrible things about Bob—not about me. It surprised me at the time that he was not nearly so concerned about the truck as he was concerned about the name.

Christians wear the name of Jesus Christ. That gives us a totally different set of priorities in life. We no longer are persons who simply go by our choices and by our reputation and by our comforts and by our conveniences. We are concerned for the Name that we wear and the reputation that it has.

Gaius was concerned about the reputation of the Name of Jesus Christ. He wanted everyone to think well of the Name of Jesus, that was his primary motivation. It wasn't his only motivation, but it was his

primary motivation to treat well all who wore the Name of Jesus.

But there is a little more detail that is added here. These missionaries had themselves gone out for the sake of the Name and, therefore, they did not solicit financial support from the people they were hoping to win, the pagans as they are described here in the New International Version of the New Testament.

It's important to understand that in the first century, and even in parts of the world today, there are philosophers and religious teachers who make

their money by going out and finding people to teach and then collecting fees or offerings from them. It was very common in the first century world and particularly in the Greek culture. They

would come up with some novel new teaching or some religious idea or some story that came from the deities off Mount Olympus and after they would tell their story, they would collect money from all of their students or all of their hearers.

Christian missionaries were extraordinarily different in the approach that they took because Christian missionaries wouldn't take money from those that they taught. Their logic was that they were communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ as a free gift. If they were to accept money, that would contaminate the transmission of the message. People might think that they were paying to get the salvation that Jesus Christ had died for, and in fact, that God offers absolutely free.

This is the rationale for a number of practices and policies that we have here at Wooddale Church. For example, when we know that we have a larger than normal number of guests and visitors, virtually without exception, before our offering I will say that if you are a visitor here today, please be our guest. We are not asking, nor are we expecting, you to contribute.

We have events here at Wooddale Church that are particularly geared to outsiders. On those occasions we go out of our way not to have an offering at all because we don't want to communicate to those we want to reach that they have to pay, because what we are offering is free.

That is also why at Wooddale Church we don't have fund raising activities. We don't have car washes and we don't have bazaars, and we don't sell cookies or candy for fund raising purposes. All this is because we want to make the Name, the Name of Jesus Christ, look good.

As John wrote to Gaius, it was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans.

Now, III John 8 (or, if you have corrected in your

***Christians wear the name of Jesus Christ.
That gives us a totally different set of priorities in life.***

Bibles, “Gaius” verse 8) is really a summary of this entire paragraph, although it does have an interesting and wonderful new thought in it. It says, “We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth.” So here is the encouragement that Christian hospitality and missionary support should not be an individual thing, but rather be a together thing.

The linguistic emphasis here is on the word “we”, which is then further emphasized later on with “together”. There are many reasons for this. Together, collectively, we can do things that individually none of us would be able to do. Together we can share the responsibility, but together we can also share the blessings. No one, not even Gaius, should have all the responsibility for lodging or for sending out missionaries or making the name of Jesus Christ look good. And no one, not even Gaius, should get all the blessings that come from doing those things.

Again, this speaks powerfully to how a local church should operate. We must understand that our treatment of strangers is not to be left to one person. It’s for all of us, together, to treat strangers well, to love strangers. And that goes for our support of missionaries as well.

There is a California church that went through an interesting experience in terms of how they go about supporting missionaries. A number of people in the church had missionaries they were interested in, that they supported individually. They came to the leadership of the church and encourage the church to organizationally take on the support of these missionaries. There’s nothing wrong with that. But what the church leadership discovered was that, after the church took on the support of these missionaries, these individuals would take all of their contributions and designate them to go only for that missionary in whom they had an interest.

So here’s a hypothetical example. This family has some missionary friends, maybe even relatives, whom they individually support for \$1,000 a year. At the same time, they contribute \$3,000 a year to the ministry of the church. What they would do is approach the church leadership and say, “We know these people well and they’re good missionaries. We’ve known them for a long time. We would like the church to put them on the church budget for \$3,000 a year.” And the church agrees to this. Then these people take the \$3,000 they were giving to the church and earmark it to go specifically for those missionaries.

For the missionaries that needed support in order to go to their particular place of ministry, that was a positive thing. But what happened was that so many people in the church started doing that that eventually there were inadequate funds for the church to pay its bills.

The result was that the church adopted a very

interesting policy. They decided that as a church, collectively, together, they would no longer support any missionaries. Instead, they would invite missionaries into the church, and those missionaries would be free to raise individual support from anybody in the church who wanted to support them, but there was no collective support, no budgetary support.

As I reflect on this, it was a marvelous example of American individualism, and it was a total breach of New Testament Christianity. What they did sounds great as far as American individualism and entrepreneurialism is concerned, but it is not much as far as New Testament Christianity is concerned.

John says that we should work together, and this has shaped the policy of Wooddale Church and a lot of other churches as well. For example, at Wooddale Church we make Faith Promises each year to commit money to missionaries and to missions. The rate at which those commitments come in is fantastic. So far this year, if you pro rate it over the period of a year, it’s at a rate of 101 percent. So people not only make that commitment, but they’re serious about it in terms of giving the money that they have committed to give.

At the same time, we at Wooddale Church are discouraged from designating individually for missionary support. All that is based upon the notion that we need to stick as close as possible to what we perceive to be this biblical approach.

Well, as we close this New Testament book of “Gaius”, I would like us to do so feeling good, feeling good about Gaius, this man of 2,000 years ago, but feeling good about ourselves as well. As we close our Bibles, it should be with a fresh motivation from God and from his word to treat others right. Better than Burger King or any business in America could ever even dream about. May we treat others in a manner that is worthy of God, as if they were Jesus Christ himself, and may we do it for the sake of the Name, the Name of Jesus Christ. May we treat others well. And may we live well so that the Name of Christ that we wear will shine brightly. May his reputation be enhanced because of all that we say and all that we do and the way that we say it and do it throughout this week.

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