

Hospitality and not patronage: Lessons in relationships from 3 John

A unique look at John's letter to Gaius that sheds light on creating a positive environment where believers can feel respected, needed, and loved.

[Igor Lorencin](#)

John, in his third epistle, teaches an important lesson in interpersonal relations that, if implemented, could resolve many a conflict in our congregations and create a positive environment where believers can feel respected, needed, and loved.

The apostle John wrote the letter to a church member named Gaius. He praises him for his generous hospitality toward traveling missionaries (vv. 3–8). This conduct contrasts with that of another member, Diotrephes, who does not accept John's letters, gossips about the apostle, refuses to welcome traveling missionaries sent by the apostle, and even expels them and their guests from the church (vv. 9, 10).

Genuine hospitality versus patronage had become the major issue.

When a relationship of hospitality becomes imbalanced, it usually turns into a relationship of patronage. Diotrephes seems to have been of the latter kind. Christian church gatherings in the first couple of centuries were held in private homes. Since Diotrephes was able to prevent access to the church for certain individuals, that local church was probably meeting in his household. The epistle contrasts his tendency toward patronage with the genuine hospitality of Gaius.

John calls Diotrephes' works "evil" (v. 11) and warns Gaius not to follow them. He then commends another church member—Demetrius (v. 12). Demetrius seems to have been a member of the same church who practiced hospitality, but he was expelled by Diotrephes. John recommends that Gaius join forces with the isolated Demetrius and continue his works of hospitality. In order to have a deeper understanding of why John recommends hospitality and condemns patronage, we need to understand the culture and customs of the time.

With hospitality as a host-guest relationship, where hosts and guests are equal, the hosts tend to even subordinate themselves to the wishes and needs of the guests. Expressed in verse 8 with the Greek word *hupolambanein*, the idea of subordination calls for support for visitors. The phrase demands deference toward the other party, suggesting a sense of reciprocity whereby host-guest roles may experience a reversal in future encounters, so that the guest becomes a host and the host a guest. Thus ancient hospitality is a relationship that promotes equality among all participants.

On the other hand, patronage becomes a relationship of inequality, with the patron always above the client. The relationship can be described as also reciprocal in the sense that the client needs to

give something in return for the received benefits, but the patron remains always superior with no exchange of roles as in a hospitality relationship. Patrons regularly look for personal gain, instead of how to benefit their clients. Thus patronage develops into a condescending attitude motivated by selfishness and inequality.

Why does John recommend hospitality instead of patronage in a church setting? Hospitality is a relationship of equals and brings a positive spirit into a Christian community. Deference of both parties to each other also contributes to a positive rapport between them. The element of subordination to the needs of the other, present in hospitality, brings a spirit of service. The reciprocity that exists in hospitality leads members to serve the needs of each other in a church community. If all church members— rich and poor, young and old, influential and noninfluential—were to practice such hospitality, what a revival would take place in the faith community!

On the other hand, patronage leads to relationships of inequality in church communities. Where patronage rules, there is always someone who believes themselves to be superior and deserving of a better position (see v. 9). Where patronage rules, a serving attitude does not exist and willing subordination becomes nonexistent (v. 10). In patronage relationships, the patron subordinates others. Instead of deference, domination surfaces. As a relationship of unequals, patronage has a tendency to destroy a church.

In summary, John presents hospitality as a positive model for structuring relationships in a local church, and rejects patronizing relationships as negative and damaging. We find John's central thought in verse 8: "We ought therefore to show hospitality to such men so that we may work together for the truth" (NIV). How do you work together for the truth? By showing hospitality and living in a spirit of hospitality. How do you work against the truth? By exhibiting a condescending attitude, imposing your will over others, and ruling instead of serving.

Serving in the Gospels

In the Gospels we observe that serving was a constant problem among the disciples. Repeatedly Jesus catches them in discussions about which of them is greater ([Mark 9:33–37](#)). Some of them even dare to ask for top positions in His future kingdom ([Mark 10:35](#)). Sinful human nature desires to rule, and serving does not come natural to us. So Jesus told His disciples, " 'You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many' " ([Mark 10:42– 45, NIV](#)).

The upper room experience presents most dramatically the need to cultivate a serving attitude among believers ([John 13:1–17](#)). In New Testament times, when guests entered a house, a host would, first of all, wash the guests' feet and thus show a required attitude of subordination. A host shows honor and respect to the guests by bowing down to serve. But in the upper room there was no one to serve. A servant was needed. One would think that the disciples would have learned something about the needed attitude after living with Jesus for three and a half years. But

no one thought about equality, deference, and hospitality, but rather about ruling others, domination, and patronage.

In that situation Jesus stepped in. He became a host and served everyone, leaving us an example to follow. Christianity cannot be described as ruling as patrons do in a patron-client relationship but about serving as hosts do in a hospitality encounter. Jesus showed us the perfect servanthood. He served not only in the upper room, but went all the way to the Cross. Even today He continues to serve us with His whole life and attitude centering around service. In His hospitality He invites us to Him; He wants to serve us. But at the same time He wants us to have the same attitude of hospitality and to serve others.

Today, patronage in churches can often be found in the form of members eager to impose their will over the rest of the church community. Often such patrons are materially rich and believe that because of their financial contributions to the church they have a right to unduly influence and decide on issues pertaining to the church—at times with no consideration of the opinion of others. Such patrons may not have been successful in other areas of life and want to show their influence within the faith community by imposing their will over others. Whenever a person, either alone or in league with other like-minded people, tries to impose their will over the rest of the church community, it reveals a patronizing attitude. By nature, patronage does not have an interest in equality among church members, but in rulership, power, and domination.

On the other hand, an attitude of hospitality promotes among members a spirit of service and equality. Among Christians who believe in the priesthood of all believers, church offices should not be used for the purpose of ruling over others. Members with higher offices are required to serve more and not less. If higher offices tend to lord over others, then the spirit of patronage and dominance determine church life and conflicts are unavoidable. Hospitality calls for service of everyone to everyone and such an attitude produces equality for all participants. In such an environment people will feel needed, respected, and loved.

Becoming more hospitable

Third John's burden includes the following two questions: How can I become a more hospitable person interested in a relationship of equals? How can I serve others and spread that serving attitude in my surroundings? The disciples had a hard time with such questions. If it were not for the shocking experience of the Cross, they probably never would have learned how to serve others. But the Cross defined them. The Cross forced them to become people of hospitality—people who do not care about ruling, but focus on serving.

What impact does the Cross have on our lives? How deeply does the gospel impact us? Does it make us into people who are ready to give up self-interest in order to benefit others? The third epistle of John teaches us that patronage, domination, and ruling have no place in a Christian community. Churches need hospitality, a relationship of equality, where everyone willingly takes on the role of a host and of a guest, everyone serving and being served at the same time. When a church becomes moved and motivated by a spirit of genuine hospitality and service, there is no limit to the power and usefulness of such a church. It will become a magnet for people in need

who will, in turn, serve others and thus multiply the number of those being saved. We need Gaius, not Diotrephes.

Ministry Magazine, February 2008
Ministrymagazine.org