

EARLY CHURCHES MARKED BY INTERNAL DISCORD

Things weren't always sweetness and light in early Christian circles. It's not just that the followers of Jesus kept running into opposition from outsiders. More often than not the trouble was internal. The early churches could not get their own act together. Their history is spotted with embarrassing examples of intramural jealousy, cliquishness and outright nastiness.

One telling piece of evidence is the letter included in the Christian scriptures which is usually called the Third Epistle of St. John. The trouble is, you have to read between the lines to catch what was going on. But if you pretend that you're reading someone else's mail, the job will be more interesting.

It won't take long to read, either. In most Bibles Third John doesn't even fill a whole page.

What you need to do is figure out the cast of characters in this mini-drama. First, there is the author. He doesn't give his name, just his title, "The Elder." He sounds like a venerable church leader positioned in some headquarters city.

Next there's the person who received this letter. He is identified as Gaius. It's obvious that Gaius was a member of a church located quite some distance from the Elder's home. Gaius has a good reputation as a loyal supporter. When traveling missionaries ride the circuit, they can count on a free meal and a warm bed at Gaius' house before they go on their way.

Those traveling missionaries are the third in the list of characters. They are simply called "the brethren," and they are the ones who carried favorable reports about Gaius back to the Elder.

Fourth in the list is a fellow named Diotrephes. He is the villain. He, too, was located quite a distance from the Elder. But he must have lived close to Gaius. If they weren't in the same church, they must have been near neighbors.

Diotrephes sounds like a Young Turk who doesn't want to have anything to do with orders from headquarters. He bad-mouthed the Elder and took over his hometown church.

He not only refuses to allow the Elder's traveling missionaries to come into his church, but if any of his people welcome the travelers they are kicked out.

The final character is Demetrius. He is an OK guy, one of the Elder's missionaries. Chances are he is hand-carrying this letter to Gaius.

The purpose of this letter is transparent. The Elder wants Gaius to welcome Demetrius and help him on his trip. Furthermore, he wants to be sure that Gaius won't fall into the clutches of Diotrephes. He wants to forestall any more defections until he can come and straighten out the mess himself.

Nobody knows for sure whether things worked out as they were supposed to. Did Gaius live up to his reputation and help Demetrius? Did Diotrephes ever get his comeuppance? History is silent on these details.

But the fact that this little note was preserved and eventually included in the Christian scriptures suggests that the incident probably had a happy ending.

Most remarkable, however, is the very fact that later Christians bothered to keep this note. For it is a rather unflattering insight into what must have been an embarrassing altercation.

Usually institutions don't preserve damaging in-house evidence, much less publish it in their PR releases. But in this case there's something refreshingly honest about finding such an incriminating manuscript in the collection of official writings.

Almost as remarkable is another minor feature which is often overlooked: Jesus Christ is not mentioned anywhere in this letter!

In fact, this is the only book in the Christian scriptures which does not at least mention the founder of the movement. This fact underscores the unusual nature of the so-called Third Epistle of St. John.

Whatever its merits as a religious document, it is an historical gem. For as a tactfully written note intended to dampen an outburst of insubordination, it also discloses something about the internal difficulties of the early Christian communities.