

3 JOHN AND DIOTREPHES

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Some assemblies and some churches have one. Some have a Mrs Diotrephes as well.

And some assemblies have more than one Diotrephes. Indeed many companies of local believers have those who purposefully and intentionally accumulate authority and a dictatorial position. They love to be in charge although they will deny this. They love to have the pre-eminence; they want to be more important than anyone else; they want to know everything that is going on and to take charge of every matter; they investigate people, invite them to meals to find out all about them and dare to call this fellowship; they want to be obeyed; they strive to be first as did Diotrephes (3 John 9). They takeover albeit subtly so that no one notices it but they build up an aura that they are indispensable with the attitude, although unsaid, "If it wasn't for me..."

This is diametrically opposed to Christian teaching. In each local assembly, the only One to have pre-eminence is the Lord Jesus Christ (Colossians 1.18). Men are to be lost sight of. The so-called established churches have failed because the Great Attraction is no longer Christ but ceremony, ritual, dogma or a pre-eminence person or persons. In some churches high-ranking clergy are referred to as 'an eminence'. Churches are ruled by men who crave the limelight and thus spurn the rule and authority of Christ.

Revelation 3.20 is often used as a text for preaching the Gospel to the unsaved yet the verse is clearly referring to the Lord Jesus knocking on the door of a local church wanting admission. But they will not let him in. We have all probably been to churches where the Lord is left out. We have meetings with endless and repetitious singing of so-called worship songs and trite jungles, dancing, swaying, hands raised and people talking about themselves.

Even in some of our assemblies, which have had a good name, there is a Diotrephes referred to as the pastor but not always in an approving way. Such a man is Mr Simpson and that Gospel Hall is known as Simpsons Chapel which, again, is not necessarily a complimentary name and no man should have the power and control. The apostle Paul, aware of such insidious empire-building said, "I have made up my mind not to recognise anyone in your assembly save Jesus Christ and Him crucified." (1 Corinthians 2.2.). Not only is the efficacy of Christ's crucifixion enduring but so is His authority and His alone. Men come and go. And they change. But the Lord Jesus is the same, yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 13.8). It is the Lord who must be in control and who gives stability. He does not change.

I am aware of a Gospel Hall near a seaside resort. One of the elders there owes a Christian Guest House and, in the summer months, most of his guests attend the assembly. How important this man feels and if it was not for him....

Brethren assemblies do not have a vicar, minister or pastor but an oversight of elders who are equal and care collectively for the spiritual and pastoral needs of the flock, that is to say its members.

This elder invites the believers back to his Guest House after the Gospel Service and speaks to correct what the evening speaker has said. This assembly was very strict but now that the elder has grandchildren things have changed. They have a Christmas tree in the worship area and a young elder is Father Christmas and all the girls and adult females have to sit on his lap. The Father Christmas is the son-in-law of the elder with the Guest House.

The assembly had brought in something that was secular which was completely opposed to their previous position. The spiritual and the secular does not agree and the assembly has opened its doors

to that which is not sacred. Mixing Santa Claus with all its fictional aspects with Jesus Christ is anathema to all true believers. On the one hand, we have the mere legend of a fat man in a red and white suit coming down chimneys with presents and, on the other hand the birth of a real baby who has brought the greatest gift of all into the world, Himself to be the Saviour of all who put their trust in Him. Father Christmas is the antithesis of Jesus Christ.

I want to introduce the word heretic from Titus 3.10. It may not see relevant at first.

As W E Vine points out a heretic is one who seeks personal preference and advantage. He is self-willed and wants to be pre-eminent and not fully consider others and because of his self-importance will not follow the teachings of the New Testament as to humility and joint leadership as a member of the oversight since he has to be the kingpin.

Alan Nute calls the heretic a man who is factious, one who takes charge of assembly affairs and forms a group within the assembly which he controls in a subtle way. Dean Alford says that a heretic is a man who is an adherent and propagator of his self-chosen form of belief and practice. He is a man who invites people from the assembly back to his house for coffee and cake or a meal in order to build up a personal following and a group that values him and his hospitality which group he controls by his social skills and charm. After the evening Gospel meeting people go to his house for coffee and cake supplied by Mrs Diotrephes and, in effect, another meeting takes place where Diotrephes corrects any error the speaker at the Hall has made and sets himself up to be the final authority and last word on everything. If a member of the assembly does not accept his invitation to his house that member is marked as not one of us. These extra meetings are not kindness but manipulation. Diotrephes manages the meetings, the assembly and the people and this is being false and deceitful and not giving the Lord His rightful place.

These meetings in his home are said to be fellowship but as I have explained elsewhere fellowship is not tea, coffee and cake or a critical analysis of someone else's ministry. When people refer to fellowship as getting to know you it is intrusive and nosiness. Fellowship is exclusively about the things of God and of the Lord Jesus. But some use the word for a chat and gossip. And this is wrong, completely wrong.

But to return to Diotrephes.

He is the man in the assembly or local church who is always right. He will stand up after another brother has spoken to 'correct' anything the previous speaker has said. In his prayers he may quote Bible verses and, in effect, give ministry. One sister in a meeting once said, "One day Peter will tell the Lord in his prayers something that God does not know!"

A young couple in an assembly wanted to be married and wanted several brethren to take part. Diotrephes said no; it was right that one man take the whole service and that should be him! The young couple were upset and the acrimonious atmosphere gave the couple a wrong start in their lives together.

Another case was of a young man who wanted to be baptised. The elders had an oversight meeting and agreed a date when they would all be there to witness this important event. The young man later said who he wanted to baptise him and Mr and Mrs Diotrephes rang him up saying that Mr Diotrephes must do it. However, the baptism went ahead in accordance with the young man's wishes and Mr and Mrs Diotrephes stayed away from the meeting because they did not get their own way and had not been granted pre-eminence.

There is another problem that arises in some assemblies and churches when it has within its rank a very learned and academic brother... perhaps with a theology degree. Diotrephes is offended by this

and makes statements such as. “He went to Bible College and has a degree. So what? I have been to the University and taught by the Holy Spirit and that is the most vital qualification!” Of course, there is no such university.

We had in our assembly a very gifted Jewish man who had been converted to the Lord Jesus. Because he was an academic and a Jew some of the sisters did not like him and refused to take the bread and wine if he got up to give thanks for it. The elder I am referring to once got up in a meeting and took some passage from the Old Testament and quoted Hebrew words regularly and said, “Such and such a writer says that this word means so and so, but I tell you the truth, it means something else!”

At the end of the meeting, and so full of himself, he approached the Hebrew Christian and said, “I am sure you are pleased that I used Hebrew words correctly!”

My friend replied, “You did not get one right! Clearly you do not know what you are talking about!”

Diotrephes was angry and walked away in a temper.

All of what I have written may be interpreted as my being bitter or having a personal axe to grind. This is not my intention but rather a warning to people to be aware of such a man in their meeting.

An elder in an assembly used to arrange things in his assembly without telling the rest of the elders. He was a Diotrephes. The other elders found about these matters ‘on the grapevine’. He arranged the baptism of a man not in his assembly who had a serious drink problem. He arranged a party for a couple in another meeting who were to celebrate a wedding anniversary. No other elders knew about this and the couple themselves did not want a party and so the project fell through.

It will be realised that such men are proud. The New Testament passes a verdict on such men as, for example, in the words of James 4. 6, “God resisteth the proud.” The word resist here means to oppose, to stand against and to engage in battle against. With pride goes conceit, personal vanity and arrogance, assertive presumption and one’s self-importance. Proverbs 26.12 says that a fool has better prospects than a man wise in his own eyes. Such men also boast. They may not do verbally but their actions declare their so-called virtues. They love the pre-eminence because they love themselves. They are selfish and uncaring about others. And all of this says James 4.16 is evil. The apostle said that no one should think highly of himself (Romans 12.3). Peter wrote that all true believers are to be clothed in humility and that God not only resists the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5.5).

A man’s pride shall bring him low (Proverbs 29.23) and God only dwells with those of a contrite and humble spirit (Isaiah 57.15) and we read that the believer who is the ‘greatest’ in the Kingdom of God is one who, in this life, in this life, is as humble as a little child (Matthew 18. 4).

F B Hole writes that Diotrephes was an elder lording it over the local assembly and would not allow or have anything done that might cause him to take a subordinate position. Apparently, he would not receive anyone into the assembly that he did not like nor had authority or deeper spirituality so that he would not be diminished. If he later found out that someone in the assembly was more spiritual he would do what he could to disgrace or excommunicate this person.

Diotrephes would not accept the authority of John who personally knew the Lord. Diotrephes was wilful and disobedient to the Lord and therefore no friend of Christ or His people.

Professor E M Blaiklock strongly states that Diotrephes behaviour was not the behaviour of a Christian and that it is unlikely that he could be termed as a Christian. He was a Christian outwardly but not inwardly.

Blaklock writes, “Strange birds nest in the mustard tree, and the breed who find their Christian congregation a stage for their personal ambitions or their sphere of arrogance and aggrandisement have not been confined to any time or space. Like the poor, they are always with us.”

Diotrephes was not only the senior elder but a trouble maker too. He was probably a slanderer, gossip and a tattler (all three words could render the verb in verse 10). The Didache, an early Christian manual of Christian morals and church practice, lays down firm guidelines to guard against ‘Christ-traffickers’, people who make personal profit out of their own style of Christianity.

The professor continues, “Diotrephes, a rich layman, leader of some faction as those who rent the assembly at Corinth asunder may have challenged John’s authority. Or he simply may have been a domineering man who liked his own way which is not uncommon in human situations.”

He was clearly factious and the type of man of Titus 3.10,

A brother was allowed to stand down as an elder and yet Diotrephes demanded to know the reason. He was assured that it was not a spiritual reason and no offence or misdemeanour had taken place. But Diotrephes and one of his supporters pressed for an answer to their questions. The cruel pressure was too much and the brother left and yet the assembly had a clandestine meeting about him charging him with all sorts of indiscretions all of which were untrue. He was said to be in gross doctrinal error on the Trinity but he was not as all the Brethren who have heard the tape recording and read his notes have unanimously testified.

Dr Graham Scroggie says, “Diotrephes had arrogated the assembly to himself in authority and control. He was proud, haughty, aggressive and forceful and dominated the local church. This is the indictment that he did not acknowledge the authority of the apostle. He ‘prated’ against John, that is to say that he talked nonsense and he did so with ‘wicked words’ that is to say that he slandered him. He refused hospitality to missionaries whom John had recommended and those who would have received them he expelled from the assembly. “

There were people like this in the apostolic church and there are men like this today. I have met some.

It is true that the pride, conceit and self-appointed pre-eminence of such men enables them to maintain their insincere position. In order to do that, they can blacken the character of a man when they cannot refute his position and character. This is the well-known ad hominem trick but it is doubly despicable when indulged in by Christians who claim to contend for the truth.

It is said that the Devil does not have to do all his own divisive work when Diotrephian people do it for him.

The epistle was written by John to his friend Gaius wishing him prosperity and good health and how pleased he was with all the good reports he had heard about Gaius and his faithfulness. John refers to the converts which whom Gaius had dealings as his children and how important it is that they walk, that is to say live, in and with the truth. John is delighted with the work being achieved among the Gentiles and how they should be received in fellowship.

But after all the good news there is the evil man Diotrephes and the exhortation that we must not follow evil but only that which is good. What is good is of the Lord such as those qualities in Philippians 4 verse 8. We must not assume that all those who perform good works are Christians and worthy of heaven although faith without good works is dead. All that is evil is of the Devil who tries to sift Christians as wheat. He is a cunning and clever foe but he is still the prince of darkness who wants to blind the eyes of everyone to the truth.

John commends another worker for Christ, one Demetrius. It is true that the Lord requires labourers in His harvest in the pursuance both of the Gospel and true ministry but often what He gets is modernism and entertainment and the preaching of self. Modern Christians think it is a crime to be old fashioned and stuffy and that worship must be lively and fun and the Devil wants to draw attention away from both Christ and the truth. I believe he has infiltrated the Church and created division and advocated worldly methods rather than spiritual truth.

The apostle wants to say many other things but hopes to meet with these Christians soon.

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