

It Is Written

*A weekly publication of the
Junction Highway church of Christ in Kerrville, TX.
Vol. 4 November 20, 2022 No. 47*

Beware: Diotrephes At Work

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In August of 1956, I heard the late brother Gardner Hall preach on "The Baptism of Diotrephes." I recall very little of the sermon beyond the announcement of the title and brother Hall's unique way of introducing it. It went something like this: "*We do not know who baptized Diotrephes. We do not know when or where he was baptized. We only know that he must have been baptized somewhere by someone, since he was a member of the church. All we know for sure about his baptism is that with it the church received a first class troublemaker.*"

Brother Hall then went on to say that it is a pity that all we can say about some members of the church is that when they were baptized that the church received trouble rather than an asset.

I was a very young and inexperienced preacher. I am sure I had read III John before but had not been impressed with this character, Diotrephes. I knew little about congregational problems, so had little to which I could relate the application of his sermon. In the years since, I have come to know churches whose effectiveness has either been greatly hampered or even destroyed because they have allowed themselves to be dominated by a modern Diotrephes. Let me remind you of what John said about Diotrephes: "*I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who love to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church*" (III John 9).

How could a church become a victim of such a church bully? How does such a church dictator gain enough power to lord his will over a whole congregation? These questions were raised in my mind when this passage was first called to my attention by brother Hall's sermon. As I have since meditated on this passage and personally observed a few modern cases, I think I have a better insight into it now. Though I have known so very few churches who, in my judgment, were under the power of such a person, those I have known have truly suffered at their hands. Among the church bullies I have known, one was an elder, one was a preacher and another was "just a member" of the congregation. In each case they all had a common denominator they loved preeminence and would do almost anything to gain it over their brethren.

Such a person seldom stops until either his control over the church is near absolute or the church is in shambles. It is his way or no way. His self-evaluated superior judgment must reign supreme or else. He seldom stops until he can yell "jump" and the brethren reply, "How high?" It matters little to him how many are hurt or how much confusion is created on his way to gaining control of the church.

If one, like Diotrephes, could ascend to such power in a church during the apostles' lifetime, how much more likely is it to happen today? Sometimes it takes place with good brethren being almost powerless to prevent it. However, if brethren can identify a preeminence lover early and understand how he maneuvers his way into position, it will go a long to minimize the damage he can do.

So, we again raise the question, "How can a Diotrephes happen?" We need to understand, first, that one cannot do it alone. He must have either the support or acquiescence of other members of the church. As a starter, he can generally count on that goodly number who are going to remain passive, regardless of what happens. They will not actively support wrong, but they are not going to actively oppose it either. A Diotrephes may not gain their active support, nor will he ever provoke their active resistance.

In most cases, like a school-yard bully, he gains the active support of a few disgruntled cohorts who, for reasons of their own, are willing to join hands with him in his work. From this power nucleus, unless stopped early, he gradually extends his power over the rest of the congregation until his judgment becomes

the law for that church.

A Diotrephes usually skillfully makes use of three powerful tools to reach his ambitious goal of controlling the church -captivation, intimidation, and elimination.

Captivation

At first, he wins as many supporters as possible by turning on his charming personality. Like the young man out to win the heart and consent of an innocent young maiden, he zealously circulates among unsuspecting members of the congregation, zealously courting them with "smooth words and flattering speech" (Romans 16:17-18), sometimes even showering them with gifts and favors. Paul, in another place, mentions such captivators: "They zealously court you, but for no good; yes, they want to exclude you, that you may be zealous for them" (Galatians 4:17). Those first-century self-serving courtiers had an advantage of sorts over Paul. Paul was duty bound to tell the Galatian brethren the truth - no matter what. He must tell them what they needed to hear, not merely court their favor. So, he raised the rhetorical question, "Have I therefore become your enemy because I tell you the truth?" (Galatians 4:16) in contrast to those who were courting the brethren for their own purposes.

One seeking preeminence over people is usually a good student of human nature and the art of having one's way with people. He knows how to cleverly manipulate their base yearnings and anxieties to his advantage. Man's basic desires for attention, acceptance, approval, or affluence can be skillfully used by a would-be Diotrephes to gain control over his brethren. It matters not whether he can deliver these things, as long as people think he can.

Of those modern Diotrepheses that we can observe, such courting or charming is their first and most productive approach. They use the dangling carrot to the fullest before bringing out their sticks. But, since they are seldom able to gain complete control over the congregation through captivation, they now must take additional measures.

Intimidation

Having failed to charm all the brethren into subjection, the Diotrephes now rips off his sweet-spirited mask and begins to play hardball. He proceeds to whip the remaining hold-outs into line through intimidation. The Diotrephes of Ill John used "malicious words" against those who stood in his way of complete control.

Some brethren, though they may be as harmless as doves, are as wise as serpents and can see right through a veneer of "smooth words and flattering speech." They are not fooled for a minute. Brother Diotrephes must, somehow, gain control over these brethren. Smooth words have failed, now it is time to beat them into subjection with malicious words if he can. Where enticements fail - attacks and/or threats often succeed. He now plays on their fears, rather than their aspirations. So, brethren often cease all resistance and let him have his way, rather than subject themselves to continual verbal abuse.

If he does not get his way, he may threaten them, personally or collectively as the church, for not yielding to his judgment. Such a person often threatens to leave the congregation, taking with him those under his influence. So, not only would the church lose members, it would also likely lose money and talents. So, intimidated by the threat, brethren yield rather than run that risk. So, he has now extended his control a step further.

Elimination

Now the very few who were not wooed by his sweet courting nor intimidated by his malicious words, still stand in the way of his complete control. It is elimination time. Note what John said Diotrephes did: "And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church." As long as he gets his way, a Diotrephes cares not how many good brethren he eliminates - either by driving them away or wrongfully "putting them out of the church." His basic problem is his love for preeminence and he will resort to any measure to get it.

Brethren, if you have in your midst one that is showing signs of seeking preeminence over his brethren, you need to keep an eye on him. When and if he begins to form a faction around himself, deal with him early (Titus 3:10) or he will make havoc on the church. The sad truth is that he may gain the upper hand before his true character manifests itself to enough people to stop him. We need to study diligently and regularly pray for wisdom and courage so that perhaps we can keep the church where we worship from being ruined by a modern Diotrephes.