

It Is Written

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Service Or Power

By Doy Moyer

“I wrote something to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have first place among them, does not receive our authority” (III John 9). Refusing the authority of the apostles and seeking to take first place among others, like Diotrephes, is a fundamental betrayal of the fellowship among believers. It is a breach of trust in which one preys on the faith and love of others. Christians of all people ought to know they are to be humble, not self-exalting; they are to be servants, not those who demand to be served (Mark 10:44-45). They are to put others first (Philippians 2:3-4).

But the one who knows that this is the way Christians are supposed to be, and yet disregards those attitudes, is now in the position of taking advantage of the good graces of God’s people. He knows they are supposed to put others first, so he presumes to take that position and expects not to be opposed. One who does this to a congregation will bully his way through to be the “top dog” as he conflates power with leadership. What he says goes and no one can tell him otherwise. If someone does oppose him, he may pull out these very passages that tell us what our attitudes are supposed to be. He’ll say he’s just protecting the church because no one else will. His delusions are many and his selfishness is evident.

However, servants in a congregation are first servants of God, then others. In serving God first, we do have the responsibility to deal with those who contradict plainly God’s expressed will. Paul told Titus that this is an important function of shepherds. The shepherd is one who should be “holding to the faithful message as taught so that he will be able both to encourage with sound teaching and to refute those who contradict it. For there are many rebellious people, full of empty talk and deception...” (Titus 1:9-10). A congregation filled with God’s servants will put Diotrephes on notice. His self-willed control of others cannot stand. He will be refuted.

Remember, though, that the shepherd is truly a servant. He is not to lord it over the group or be self-willed. His efforts are in service to God and others, protecting and fighting for the souls of those he serves. He must never allow his efforts to cross over into the self-will of a Diotrephes. He must avoid becoming what he is meant to oppose. Perhaps this is why a multiplicity of elders is wise. They can check and balance one another, even as a congregation should keep watch and make sure the service of the presbytery is godly and pure. Through love, we are all serving one another.

This is why the examples of elders are so important. Peter writes about shepherds, “Shepherd God’s flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock” (I Peter 5:2-3). They lead by example, not by command. Their decisions should always be geared toward the service of God and the group. They do not stand above the word of God, but always solidly under God’s will and in the best interests of others.

The preacher should likewise take note of his position. He is not the Lord of the congregation. His is not a position of exaltation or power. He is to be serving others through faithfully teaching the word of God, submitting himself to God first then others. His position is not one of pride and preeminence but of humble servitude. If he thinks otherwise, he should not be doing that work. One who thinks he is to exert control over others as a teacher or preacher betrays everything that it means to represent the gospel. Paul told Timothy, “If you point these things out to the brothers and sisters, you

will be a good servant of Christ Jesus, nourished by the words of the faith and the good teaching that you have followed" (I Timothy 4:6). Preaching and teaching is a service, a ministry to be fulfilled (II Timothy 4:5), not a power to be exerted.

That service (ministry) is also something to which everyone in Christ should pay attention. The edification of God's people is meant to "equip the saints for the work of ministry" (Ephesians 4:12). This is how the body of Christ is strengthened and built up. This is how Christ's people are united. Diotrefes and his type, on the other hand, will tear down and destroy because to them, all that matters is their power and control. If they cannot control, they will pursue chaos and destruction.

Leaders among God's people must proceed God's way, and that way is through loving service to one another. Losing sight of that mindset will produce those who, like Diotrefes, like to have first place among the disciples. But among followers of Christ, it should not be so. "Just as each one has received a gift, use it to serve others, as good stewards of the varied grace of God" (I Peter 4:10).

It Is A Small Thing That I Am Judged By You

By Whit Sasser

We read the following from I Corinthians 4:3-4, "But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by a human court. In fact, I do not even judge myself. For I know of nothing against myself, yet I am not justified by this; but He who judges me is the Lord."

Gleaned from both of his New Testament epistles to the Corinthians, we see that Paul often had to defend his apostleship, explain his motives in not having come to them sooner, argue his right to forego marriage and/or to be paid for his services, challenge the accusation that he behaved differently in person than his writings reflected, and all this to his brethren! So, what else is new? The very same kind of thing continues to this day.

But notice that Paul said that it really didn't bother him much what brethren thought of him, even if some actually judged him one way or another. And for that matter, he didn't even spend much time concerned with how he judged himself. He knew that there was nothing he had against himself (i.e. he lived in all good conscience) but in the end, it was only God's approval he had to have, for that was all that mattered. To that, I heartily say, "Amen!"

Paul cared how others viewed him. In II Corinthians 13:6-9, he expresses his desire that they do not view him negatively but then goes on to say how that having their approval at all costs was simply not possible. Mainly he wanted them to behave honorably and if in so doing he continued to be seen as weak, then so be it. Paul, as always, fully sacrificing himself for others. Longing for other's salvation, even at the expense of his own diminished self-image.

I, too, am concerned about my reputation among brethren and it bothers me greatly when I know someone disapproves of me or some decision I have made, but I have to seek to imitate Paul, even as he was imitating Christ. Paul considered it a small thing to him that others criticized him, passed judgment on his integrity, or upbraided him for decisions he made differently than they would have made. But that was also the same with our Lord. He was called names like "winebibber" and "friend of sinners" because of who he associated with, was criticized sometimes for his decisions (i.e. healing on the sabbath...why not just wait until the next day and no one would have a problem?) and accused of having lost his mind for getting so wrapped up in the things of God that He did not eat. But as the saying goes, "it all was like water off a duck's back." I am sure that Jesus was concerned as to what others thought of him ("Who do men say that I am?" He asked on one occasion) but ultimately it mattered very little, it seems.

So whether it be the Greatest Example, Jesus, or His noble follower, Paul, I have two great role models along these lines. They both say that in the final analysis, what I most need to be concerned about is not what the world thinks of me, nor my brethren, and not even myself, but what the Lord thinks. As Paul says in a certain place, "For not he who commends himself is approved, but whom the Lord commends" (II Corinthians 10:18). And in another place, "Study to show yourself approved unto God" (II Timothy 2:15). And so I shall.