

Diotrephes

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In John's small letter to Gaius, written just before the end of the first century, the apostle introduced the world to a character named Diotrephes. Those few short verses have made this man infamous and his name live on in disrepute. The context of his reference to this fellow is a report of several good men from John's circle of co-workers who had sacrificed greatly to go abroad and preach the gospel, leaving hearth and home. They were mostly received warmly by brethren as they traveled and worked among complete strangers. But when they came to the area where Gaius lived and worked, they not only found a friendly welcome from this gentle and loving soul, but they also met with rejection and hostility from an individual whom John refers to as Diotrephes.

Having encouraged Gaius to continue his practice of accepting these weary and road-worn travelers into his home, John proceeded to deal with the issue of Diotrephes and his ilk. He says,

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, received us not. Therefore, when I come, I will remember his works that he does, gossiping against us with malicious words. And he is not even content with that. Not only does he not receive the brothers, but he forbids those who would, and throws them out of the church! Beloved, do not follow what is evil, but that which is good. He who does good is of God; but he who does evil has not seen God (3 John 9-11).

From this little snapshot of first-century church life we gain tremendous insight into the history of the church after the disappearance of most of the apostles of Christ. The apostles of Jesus were mighty men of faith, possessed with apostolic authority and power, and it could not be expected that most all of them could leave the scene without there being some repercussions in and among the churches. There was a vacuum of authority in some places, especially where strong leadership was missing, and evil men stepped up in some cases to fill the void.

Diotrephes was just such a man. What is especially interesting in his case, however, is the fact that he was willing to go so far as to defy the apostle John. He may have been emboldened because of John's advanced age (John may have been over ninety years old at this point). Or, he could have been so hateful and arrogant that he was willing even to reject the authority of John in order to get his own way in the local church setting. It cannot be forgotten that, while Paul still lived, his authority was also rejected by false apostles and their disciples at Corinth in about A.D. 59, which would have been some 30-40 years before this (cf. 1 Cor. 9; 2 Cor. 12:11, 12). So, his defiance was not an entirely new experience for the apostles.

Benjamin Franklin once said, "He that falls in love with himself will have no rivals." Diotrephes was in love with himself. He was unwilling to allow any rivals to his authority in the church. He was a selfish and prideful man. All of us need to learn the lessons that the case of Diotrephes teaches us. Our place is never first in the Kingdom of God. The Lord Jesus is first, and must always be first, or else there is something wrong with our own particular view of the Kingdom.

When we become too concerned with matters of self-interest, the Lord's interests inevitably take a back seat to ours. When the mother of the sons of Zebedee, James, and John, came to Jesus with the request that her sons be permitted to sit, the one on his right hand and the other on his left, in his Kingdom, something inevitable occurred (Matt. 20:20, 21). First, Jesus took this opportunity to teach them about the nature of the Kingdom. Second, the Bible says, "When the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation against the two brothers" (v. 24). Jealousy and animosity were aroused in others by the whole affair. Seeking pre-eminence always results in envy and strife. It is as inevitable as the night follows the day.

What is a Diotrephes?

A Diotrephes is a religious dictator. John tells us that Diotrephes "loves to have the pre-eminence among them." He wants to rule the church. He cannot take "second fiddle," as the old saying goes. But there is something that goes along with this desire to act as a dictator in the body of Christ. Any Christian with half a brain knows that it is the spirit of pride and arrogance that motivates him, because there is nothing of the spirit of Christ that could motivate a person with such aspirations. Jesus taught his disciples the spirit of service. On two separate occasions the Lord's students quarreled about who should be the greatest among them. In one case Jesus took a little child and set him among them (Luke 9:46-48). At a different time, strife arose in the apostolic band as to "which of them should be accounted the greatest." This led Jesus to teach them a much-needed lesson about lordship: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and they that exercise authority upon them are called benefactors. But you shall not be so; but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that is chief, as he that serves. For which is greater, he that sits at the table, or he that serves? Is it not he that sits at the table? But I am among you as he that serves" (Luke 22:24-27). The Lord is looking for servants to serve him and the church, not lords to dictate to others.

But the will to rule over others is strong. Ambition in one's heart can be a mighty force and a strong temptation. And once the lust for power has been quenched, it becomes a living force within the one possessed by it. F.M. Dostoevsky was right when he said, "Whoever has experienced the power, the unrestrained ability to humiliate another human being . . . automatically loses power over his own sensations. Tyranny is a habit, it has its own organic life, it develops finally into a disease.

A man possessed of the spirit of ancient Diotrephes is one who will "rule or ruin" the church. He will have his own way in the smallest and most insignificant issues, from the

color of the paint in the vestibule to the announcement of someone's birthday before the services begin, no matter what it leads to in the long term. Such men are the cause that many congregations receive a bad reputation in their respective communities. They are the reason some churches will never grow numerically. And ultimately, they are the explanation for the fact that the Lord's people will wither away gradually and eventually disappear altogether in many towns and villages.

I have personally seen such men gradually destroy the church in a locality over several years, and at the last sell the building and arrogantly walk away as if they had done no wrong. I have read their letters of explanation to other Christians about the valiant fight fought to keep the church meeting in their community. Sometimes I, along with many who read such missives, understood that the cause of the church's failure was not the lack of interest and apathy of the people in the neighborhood, but the obsessive and hateful attitude of the one writing the letter. A Diotrephes had destroyed the church. And in the end it was that very same Diotrephes who wrote its obituary.

Of course, churches die in different communities for a whole host of reasons. I do not mean to imply that all churches that fold up their tent and leave for another location, or close down completely and finally, are plagued by someone like Diotrephes. It could just as easily be a Jezebel responsible for this catastrophe (see Rev. 2:20). And it might be explained on some other basis altogether. Churches may be hurt or even destroyed by factors outside of their own control. But all of us have to admit that there have often been modern equivalents to Diotrephes who have done irreparable harm to some congregations. We must keep our eyes open for such men, and to the best of our ability see to it that their influence is limited.

A Diotrephes is a spiritual bully. No doubt we can all remember the bullying that went on in elementary or "grammar" school, and even sometimes into high school. Certain boys always love to prey on those who are smaller than they are, to push them around and physically manhandle them. Apparently, it makes them feel big and important to do this. But all of that is in their own minds and nowhere else. What it really does is make them feared, hated, and despised by others. A bully uses fear and intimidation to get his way. I am not a psychologist, but it is clear that such a person has some sort of complex. He is mentally small, even though he may be physically large. Street gangs are made up of hierarchies of such people. These gangs are also feared rather than loved. Their brutality and lawlessness is the only thing that makes them respected. Such "respect," however, can only be appreciated by others possessing their particular mind set. A group of people with kindred spirits can be very dangerous to any community.

Diotrephes was a bully in a church setting. John tells us he was bold enough to withstand the words of an apostle of Christ (3 John 9). He gossiped about John and those who stood with him (3 John 10). Personally, he determined not to receive those whom John sent his way, and he was so dogged in this obstinacy that he required the same of the rest of the congregation, and if they did not comply, he threw them out of the church (3 John 10).

John, though, was not afraid of him. He wrote, "Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his works that he does." John was the sort of man who took the bully by the horns! If there were more men like John in the church, there would also be fewer Diotrephes types around to bring down good churches.

A Diotrephes is a selfish person, concerned only with his own interests. Oscar Wilde wrote that "Selfishness is not living as one wishes to live. It is asking others to live as one wishes to live." Diotrephes was a selfish man, but he did not "ask" others to live as he wished them to live. Rather, he browbeat and cajoled them into living as he wanted them to live.

Every Diotrephes is selfish. The good of the cause of Christ is secondary. The growth of the church is secondary. The reputation of the church in the community is secondary. Even whether the church lives or dies is secondary! His primary preoccupation is with having his own way. He will have it no matter what the consequences are for the Lord or his church in the community. His spirit is as flagrantly opposite to the spirit of Christ as any spirit could be. Paul wrote to a troubled church at Philippi, which apparently had divided up on each side of a dispute between two ladies in the congregation (4:2-3), over a matter so unimportant that Paul does not even mention it: "If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any compassion and mercies, fulfill my joy that you be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind, let each esteem other better than themselves. Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others" (2:1-4). The Diotrephean spirit runs counter to the Lord's teaching and example.

A Diotrephes is a sinner. How can a person justify such behavior on the part of one who claims the title "Christian" for himself? The truth is, in no sense can such an individual please the Lord. Diotrephes was not just in rebellion against John the apostle. He was in rebellion against God. He was no different than Korah, Dathan, and Abiram when they rebelled against Moses and Aaron (Num. 16). Jude offers a stern warning against this attitude: "Woe to them! For they have gone in the way of Cain, and ran greedily after the error of Balaam for reward, and perished in the gainsaying of Korah" (Jude 11). Make no mistake about it: Diotrephes was a man who was lost in sin, and anyone who follows in his footsteps is also a person whose soul is lost in sin.

What creates a Diotrephes?

Christians who give up and leave. Clearly the easiest thing to do when you have to deal with someone like Diotrephes is to give up and leave. But when you leave, you must understand that you have just diminished the number of those who will stand for what is right and against wrong by one, plus the number in your family if you have one. Christians who give up and leave help to create Diotrephes and make of him what he finally becomes. They do not oppose him, so he goes unopposed. He receives his power by default. He gets his way by default. They leave, and this leaves the church to Diotrephes.

Christians who avoid controversy at any cost. When Paul had finished his life of service to the Lord, and was preparing to depart this world, he wrote from his heart to Timothy. In so doing, he described his own time of sojourning in the following fashion: "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith. Henceforth, there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day; and not to me only, but to all them who love his appearing" (2 Tim. 4:7, 8).

In this same letter, the apostle briefly described two men who opposed his efforts in the gospel and turned others away from Paul as well: "This you know: that all they who are in Asia turned away from me; of whom are Phygellus and Hermogenes" (1:15). In his first letter he had spoken of two other bitter spiritual enemies, who from within the church had taught error and destroyed the faith of others: "Holding faith and a good conscience, which some having thrust from them made shipwreck of their faith; of whom is Hymeneus and Alexander, whom I delivered up to Satan, that they might be taught not to blaspheme" (1 Tim. 1:19, 20).

For the apostle Paul, it seems that dealing with men of the stripe of Diotrefes was a regular affair. Finishing his course in service to the Lord apparently involved fighting a good fight, especially against such evil men as these. This could not have been a pleasant part of his work, but Paul saw it as essential. Moreover, instead of telling future generations that the fight was over and they could relax and enjoy his victories, he warned instead, "Evil men and imposters shall wax worse and worse, deceiving and being deceived" (2 Tim. 3:13). How can we convince ourselves that we shall somehow escape this unpleasant duty? The truth is, that Christians who are unwilling to put up a fight for what is right against men like Diotrefes are merely making their wicked work that much easier.

Christians devoid of spiritual courage. Courage cannot be measured on the scales or with a measuring tape or rule. It is an invisible reality that hides in the heart until it is needed. Only very unique circumstances bring it forth. It cannot be measured, but it is surely the measure of a man. Some think that courage is the absence of fear. But they are completely wrong. Courage is bravery in the face of fear. As John Wainwright said, "There is no such thing as bravery; only degrees of fear." Acting bravely even though we are afraid is the very definition of courage. General George S. Patton, a brave soldier indeed, and a man who would know well the meaning of courage, said: "Courage is fear holding on a minute longer." In other words, it is staying in the fight in spite of our fears.

It will require spiritual courage to deal with a man like Diotrefes. It is not pleasant to be around him, and it is difficult to deal with him. Often, he is obnoxious and mean. It is so much easier to fly from his presence. But that is the path of the coward. John the apostle, aged though he was, announced his readiness to cross swords with this brute: "If I come, I will remember his deeds. . . ." The church today needs more men with the moral courage that John possessed.

Christians who are impatient. There is no quick solution to dealing with a fellow like Diotrephes. It will take some amount of time to finish the task. This is where failure sets in. Diotrephes has outlasted others, and he will outlast you also, if you are not persistent. It is not without cause that the author of the Hebrew letter emphasized the necessity of patience in receiving the various blessings of God: "That you be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (Heb. 6:12). The great promises of Holy Writ are all alike the benefits that accrue to those who are willing to endure to the end: "Be thou faithful unto death, and I will give you the crown of life" (Rev. 2:10).

The impatient Christian actually helps to create Diotrephes, because he always gives up and, in the end, encourages the man in his evil ways. Every battle he wins makes him stronger, and sometimes all we have to do is stay on the battlefield one more day to see him defeated. On the other hand, if we quit the fight, we will never know how it may have gone the following day.

What enables a Diotrephes?

The weakness of some Christians. Someone has said that the ultimate formula for failure is to attempt to please everyone. The worst thing we can do with a Diotrephes is try to please him. What this does is encourage him in his ways. This is the path of accommodation and appeasement. Most of the world in the years before World War II set upon a course of accommodation and appeasement relative to the Nazi leader, Adolph Hitler. He had written in *Mein Kampf*: "The one means that wins the easiest victory over reason: terror and force." This became his philosophy in dealing with other men and other nations.

Appeasement was the worst of all possible programs for dealing with a relentless dictator. Hitler was highly successful at first because the world would not fight him and stop his intrigues. He and his minions attacked one small country after another, capturing their industrial bases and adding them to his own, making him even more able to wage war. His early victories only emboldened him to grab for more territory and more power. Further, he became more brutal as one nation after another was crushed beneath his war machine. At the last, in a speech made to the Reichstag on April 26, 1942 he declared, "This war no longer bears the characteristics of former inter-European conflicts. It is one of those elemental conflicts which usher in a new millennium and which shake the world once in a thousand years." It is pure folly to bow to a brutal dictator. God's faithful people can no more appease and accommodate a Diotrephes than the world could Adolph Hitler. It will only embolden him to grab more and more power. In the end, he will destroy the church and wreck the souls of those who are minded to placate him. Paul said, "Have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph. 5:11).

The fear of some Christians. Fear is a powerful motivator. It can transform an otherwise strong man into a coward. Henry David Thoreau therefore said that "nothing is so much to be feared as fear." By itself it can debilitate the mind and keep us from

beneficial action. As Nehru noted, "There is perhaps nothing so bad and so dangerous in life as fear."

Fear of God is a wholesome thing. It motivates us to love and serve him. The writer of Ecclesiastes wrapped up his entire book with this simple message: "Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Eccl. 12:13). But fear of men is an unwholesome thing. In life it may begin with fear of the bully on the school playground. But that is not the end of it. Certain people because of their bearing, and perhaps even because of their bullying, can instill fear in the hearts of others even in adult life. This is something they may be fully aware of, and even pride themselves in. They enjoy it because it gives them a kind of perverse power over others. Diotrephes was undoubtedly such a fellow.

We must not forget, however, that such men only have power because we give it to them. They can only maintain their hold over us when we surrender it to them through our fear. David, who was relentlessly pursued by King Saul and whose life was constantly in danger, wrote with confidence and strength because he saw his power in God, not in his frail human body: "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the strength of my life; of whom shall I be afraid? When the wicked, even mine enemies and my foes, came upon me to consume my flesh, they stumbled and fell. Though a host should encamp against me, my heart will not fear; though war should rise against me, in this will I be confident" (Ps. 27:1-3). The author of the Epistle to the Hebrews summed up the opening lines of this psalm thus: "The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Heb. 13:6).

Defeating people like Diotrephes is quite simply a matter of strong faith in God and a steadfast refusal to fear other men. But in the end, it is a question of how much we are willing to see God as our helper in such matters. We may not always win these battles, but there is never a reason to live in fear when God is on the side of truth and right.

The impatience of some Christians. Patience is a significant element of Christian character. Without it we will fail miserably in our service to the Lord. It must also be remembered that the church will depend upon the character of each member that comprises it. Whether we personally and individually possess patience in our lives will determine whether or not the church will be successful in its various endeavors. Jesus said, "In your patience, you shall win your souls" (Luke 21:19). Paul stressed the importance of patience, especially in times of trouble and turmoil: "We glory in tribulations also, knowing that tribulation works patience" (Rom. 5:3).

God's people need to have the patience necessary to fight the battles of the faith. War is always terrible. Spiritual conflict is never easy either. If one follows the great conflicts in World War II, he will know that this great war was comprised of many battles. Some of those battles were won by the Axis powers. Because the Allies held together, though, and continued to fight on even in the face of defeat, the great war was ultimately won by the Allies. And because of this the world is a very different place than it would have been had the other side won. Margaret Thatcher said, "You may have to fight a battle

more than once to win it." The oft-quoted remarks of Calvin Coolidge are certainly helpful in this regard: "Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not; nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent. Genius will not; unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education will not; the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination are omnipotent. The slogan 'Press On' has solved and always will solve the problems of the human race."

God's people must be persistent in the face of tribulation, trouble and even defeat. A Diotrephes can be difficult to beat. But men like Diotrephes must be defeated. We have to keep in mind that it is only through patience that we will ultimately "win our souls."

The disunity of some churches. A church divided but still worshiping under the same roof is like the proverbial "house divided against itself" that Jesus spoke of. The Lord said of such a structure, "that house cannot stand" (Mark 3:25). It certainly cannot stand against a Diotrephes. The fact that a church is not truly united in a common faith and sincere love is in a precipitous and tenuous situation. This condition will open up its spiritual fortifications to effortless attack. A Diotrephes will make short work of a congregation in this predicament.

Petty differences, quarrels, and old grudges that may be capitalized upon by Satan and Diotrephes. Edmund Burke said, "By gnawing through a dyke, even a rat may drown a nation." Small, seemingly inconsequential things may have the power to destroy great churches. The petty differences that are not reconciled, quarrels unsettled, and old grudges — these are the stuff of which future troubles are made. One who wishes to seize power in a congregation may find fertile soil for his ambitions in the unsettled issues of the past.

Jesus emphasized the necessity of forgiving one another once and for all, and not bringing the quarrels of the past into the present. After he had related to his disciples the story of the unforgiving servant, he drew this conclusion: "Should you not also have had compassion on your fellow servant, even as I had pity on you? And his lord was angry, and delivered him to the tormentors, until he should pay all that was due. So likewise shall my heavenly Father do also to you, if you from your hearts do not forgive everyone his brother their trespasses" (Matt. 18:33-35).

What defeats a Diotrephes?

Christians willing to stand up and speak up. It will not help to be silent in the face of aggression. Andrew Jackson once said, "One man with courage makes a majority." If I must stand alone to fight for what is right, then I must do it, and so must you. In the mind of the aggressor, silence provides consent.

The most notorious mistake made in a situation where there is a Diotrephes is this one: When he has made his first move toward a power-grab, those with the wisdom and experience to stop him merely remain silent. If just one person speaks up, he will feel chided and perhaps stopped in his tracks, especially if that one person has the

Scriptures on his side and is not bashful about using them. But, if he is confronted with a healthy number of people who are filled with a fervent resolve to stand for what is right, he will most assuredly back down.

Christians willing to stand together, united against evil. There is great wisdom in Paul's admonition to the Philippians, "That you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). The church, when it is united as it ought to be in Christ, will be of a single mind. It will "strive together" or work in concert toward identical goals. The spreading of the gospel into all the world will be its chief purpose (Matt. 28:18ff; Mark 16:15ff.). "The faith of the gospel" will be its creed and its mantra. It will have no other and it will need no other.

A Diotrephes will steer clear of such a church. He will have a fight on his hands if he deals with them. In the end he will lose the battle if he makes the attempt, because their singleness of mind and purpose will make it impossible for him to make inroads into their number. Their unity and love for one another and for God will keep them together in spite of the threats and intimidation of such a willful man. In the end, he will have to find himself another home.

Christians willing to fight for what is right. The strength of a congregation of the Lord's people is manifested by the determination that is in the hearts of the people to fight for what is right. If they are not willing to fight, if they surrender at the first sign of conflict, if they are motivated more by fear than faith, then they will give up without a fight. A man like Diotrephes must be met with courage and resistance. The resistance must be loving and humble, but it cannot be weak or lacking in conviction. If one with a Diotrephean spirit attempts to take over a local church, God's people must contend with him earnestly. They cannot absorb his attitude, utilize his tactics, or mimic his methods, but they must not bow to his bullying either. They have to remember that living the Christian life is also "fighting the good fight of faith" (2 Tim. 4:7). The wise Abigail said that David was known as a man who "fights the battles of the Lord" (1 Sam. 25:28). It would be wonderful to have this said of us also. Paul, in his preaching work, faced a life of hardship that included "fightings without and fears within" (2 Cor. 7:5).

Churches of Christ need individuals with the strength of character essential to wage war with men like Diotrephes. Ralph Waldo Emerson had it right, and said it well, when he spoke of what it took to make a nation strong in his poem *A Nation's Strength*. It is the same thing that will make a church strong and keep it out of the hands of a Diotrephes. Emerson wrote:

What makes a nation's pillars high
And its foundations strong?
What makes it mighty to defy
The foes that round it throng?

It is not gold. Its kingdoms grand
Go down in battle shock;

Its shafts are laid on sinking sand,
Not on abiding rock.

Is it the sword? As the red dust
Of empires passed away;
The blood has turned their stones to rust,
Their glory to decay.

And is it pride? Ah, that bright crown
Has seemed to nations sweet;
But God has struck its luster down
In ashes at his feet.

Not gold but only men can make
A people great and strong;
Men who for truth and honor's sake
Stand fast and suffer long.

Brave men who work while others sleep,
Who dare while others fly —
They build a nation's pillars deep
And lift them to the sky.

Christians willing to endure difficulties and turmoil. Most of us would prefer to do things the easy way. I suppose it is a natural thing to take the course of least resistance when we attempt any endeavor. Very often things will not work out quite as we expected, however. Difficulties will arise. Adversities are as much a part of our existence as the air we breathe. We must be careful in the attitudes we take toward various kinds of adversity, lest we allow these unplanned and discouraging circumstances to get the better of us. We have it within our power to view them either as temporary setbacks or as unassailable and impenetrable walls beyond which we may not go.

The Lord Jesus endured the cross, even though he despised the shame, to the end of providing salvation for his people: "Jesus . . . for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God" (Heb. 12:2). We may all thank God that Jesus did not allow discouraging circumstances to thwart his efforts in redeeming the human race!

Some of us are like the fellow many years ago who is said to have called the doctor's house in the middle of the night informing the old doc his wife needed urgent medical attention. The wind was howling, and a chilling rain was beating at the windows. The doctor gently replied, "I'll be glad to come, but my car is in the repair shop, could you come and get me?" There was indignation at the other end of the phone as an angry voice sputtered, "What, in this weather?" We are much like this gentleman ourselves at

times. We are happy the Lord has done such great things for us, and at such great cost to himself, but we are unwilling to make any sacrifice at all on his behalf.

Henry Kaiser said, "I always view problems as opportunities in work clothes." When the church experiences difficulties, we need to set to work to fix them. It will not suffice to sweep them under the rug. If our particular difficulty comes in the person of a Diotrephes, then he should be viewed just like we would any other obstacle to the congregation's progress. We shall have to either work around him, go through him or over him, but he cannot be allowed to stop the spiritual progress of the church.

God's people must steel themselves to endure these temporary setbacks and resolve to work through to the other side of them. In the end, we shall all be better, wiser and stronger for having endured such obstacles. Carlyle wisely wrote that, "The block of granite which was an obstacle in the path of the weak, becomes a stepping-stone in the path of the strong."

Christians willing to ask God for strength and patience. We always need God's help in our lives, but never more so than when we are confronted with spiritual challenges. When the Hebrew Christians were wavering and slipping into unfaithfulness, the author of that letter counseled: "Let us therefore come boldly before the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need" (4:16). We always need prayer. But prayer must be at the top of our list when we are confronted with spiritual challenges. And the reason for this is patently obvious: God can and will help his people when they call out to him in prayer. His power is without limit and his love for us without bounds. As Paul said, "Now unto him who is able to do exceedingly abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us" (Eph. 3:20).

Christians who ask for God's help in sincere prayer will be able to overcome the evil ways of a Diotrephes. They know that they must do their part in fighting for what is right. They also know that God is greater than any mere man. In addition, if they trust God for his aid and strength, they know that he hears their prayers. John emphasized these promises as he wrote to the confused and frustrated Christians of Asia Minor: "Whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (1 John 3:22); and "This is the confidence that we have in him, that, if we ask any thing according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us, whatsoever we ask, we know that we have the petitions that we desired of him" (1 John 5:14, 15).

What avoids a Diotrephes?

A church that loves God more than it does any man. Our affections must not be set upon fallible human beings. They will often disappoint us. Even great men of God have sometimes provided poor examples to follow. Consider David, the "man after God's own heart," who so miserably failed God and his people in the matter of Bathsheba and Uriah. Think of how the apostle Peter denied the Lord three times on the night of his betrayal, and later buckled under to the pressure of Jewish friends who would not have

him hold uncircumcised Gentiles in full fellowship at Antioch (Gal. 2). Mere human beings are not an accurate measurement of what is right or wrong. More times than a few they will fail us just when we need them most.

When we set our affections above, however, we will permit God to have the say in what we believe, teach, and practice in religion. What others think about it will not determine what we think. Whether it comes in the form of a sleek new philosophy or an ancient religious tradition, it must be judged on the basis of its comparison with the Word of God (Col. 2:8). Paul concludes that we must do this because "in him (Christ) dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily." In other words, he is fully God, and God always is the ultimate source of authority.

If we hold for God and Christ this first position in our hearts (Matt. 6:33), there will be no place for a Diotrephes to take over. We will always see him as a flawed human being and will graciously admit that he has those flaws even if we otherwise see in this man some wholesome characteristics. He is only a man. He is simply a brother in the Lord. He did not die for us. He is not our Lord and he is not a god. He does not possess any authority over our faith. Our faith is in Christ and not in any man. So, if we find our friend Diotrephes guilty of sin, we will not feel ourselves obliged to justify his wrongs or somehow condone his sins. He is what he is, a frail and sinful human being who must repent of his sins or be lost forever in a devil's hell. He is not exempt from God's law, including his laws of pardon (Acts 2:38; 8:22).

A church that is set upon following the apostles' doctrine. Apostolic doctrine is the basis of our faith. The apostles of Christ were sent forth as the Lord's representatives, possessing the right to "bind on the earth what has been bound in heaven, and loose on earth what has been loosed in heaven" (Matt. 18:18). No mere man today has the power to do what the apostles could do when they lived and worked in the church. Furthermore, they did not pass on to others the empowerment which Jesus had provided to them. The church of the second and third centuries did what we must do today: it studied the writings of the apostles and prophets and quoted from Scripture. It did not launch out upon its own, charting its own course, as so many do in our own time.

Even while the apostles worked within the churches, they ingrained within the people the notion of proceeding down the path of apostolic doctrine without wavering. Luke informs us that in the first weeks of the church the twelve men who now constituted the apostolic band, while the church was under their direct oversight, thus directed and guided it: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers" (Acts 2:42). If this was their plan for the church under direct guidance of the Holy Spirit and with the apostles providing personal supervision, how could we go wrong today if we follow this pattern?

If we do respect the apostles' doctrine, we will never allow a Diotrephes to control the church. Apostolic teaching will not permit him to take over that which it was never his prerogative to possess. Moreover, apostolic teaching will inspire the Lord's faithful

people to withstand such a Diotrephes and overthrow him from his throne if he takes it unto himself.

A church that is united. Someone like Diotrephes preys upon the vulnerabilities of a divided church. A united church is not going to provide suitable soil for his efforts. There is a simple reason for this. When we have the support and consolidated strength of others, we become a mighty force that is not easily overwhelmed: "If one prevail against him, two shall withstand him; and a threefold cord is not quickly broken" (Eccl. 4:12). There is strength in numbers, and this is certainly true if these numbers are united together in a single faith and working toward the same goals. If this is not the case, however, differences provide the cracks or "chinks in the armor" that make for vulnerability.

The Lord Jesus prayed that his people would be united. On the night of his betrayal, he said: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for those also who shall believe on me through their word; that they all may be one; as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that you have sent me. And the glory that you gave to me, I have given to them; that they may be one, even as we are one" (John 17:20-22). In many instances recorded in the New Testament, the early congregations were plagued with division, just as modern ones are. It is nothing new, but it is carnal and sinful, as Paul explained to the Corinthians: "For you are still carnal; for whereas there is among you envying and strife, and divisions, are you not carnal, and do you not conduct yourselves like worldly men do?" (1 Cor. 3:3). These same Corinthians by their divided state made themselves easy prey for those false apostles who came into their midst intending to destroy the influence and work of the apostle Paul. A divided church is an easy mark for false teachers. Likewise, it sets itself up for one possessed of the spirit of Diotrephes "who loves to have the pre-eminence" in the church.

A church with strong leadership, unwilling to buckle under to petty dictators. A church in a local setting is only as strong as its leaders. Weak leaders will curse a congregation to constant problems. If it does not have strong leaders it may also fall prey to those who are willing to show leadership qualities even though they may not be good leaders or even good men. The despot and the tyrant are always looking for a situation that will allow them to take control and exercise authority over others. In the end they will take them where they want them to go, not where the Lord would have them led.

God has in mind for his people to follow Christ. A petty spiritual potentate will take them off in some other direction altogether. Jesus said, "When the blind lead the blind, they will both fall into a ditch" (Matt. 15:14). Those who are spiritually blind cannot be permitted the luxury of leadership in the household of God. Paul encouraged Titus to choose men who could be counted upon to stand for what is right as they led the church in the role of shepherd in the church: "Holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers" (Tit. 1:9). A church with strong leaders in its midst will be able to fend off the

efforts of a Diotrephes to control the Lord's people and send them sailing off haplessly into uncharted waters.