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3 John



3 John - Steve Gregg

The book of 3 John sheds light on the early development of church government and leadership roles, according to biblical scholar Steve Gregg. The letter, addressed to an individual named Gaius, warns against following the example of Diatrophys, who disfavored John's messengers. Gregg emphasizes the importance of following the examples and testimonies of trustworthy individuals rather than allowing oneself to be led astray by self-appointed leaders.

Transcript

We come to 3 John. He's writing to an actual individual. What's interesting is individual people are named in 3 John, but not in 2 John.

No one's name is ever used in 2 John. There's an elect lady. There's her children.

There's her sister, her elect sister, and her children, but no one is named. It's as if there's, you know, why doesn't he name people? Now, if John didn't name a lot of people as he did in 3 John, we might think there's nothing strange about it. But that's another thing that makes me think that the elect lady is not a person, but a church.

But this one is written to an actual person in a church, a man named Gaius. And there's another person named Diotrephes who's mentioned by name, and yet another named Demetrius. In this very short letter, which is only one verse longer than the previous one, there's three different people whose characters are described for us and whose activities in the church become worthy of mention and are the reason for writing the letter.

What I'd like to do is read the whole letter and then go through and make the observations about it, rather than try to explain the letter without reading it to you. Let's just read through it. It doesn't take but a couple minutes.

The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth. Beloved, I pray that you may prosper in all things and be in health, just as your soul prospers. For I rejoiced greatly when brethren came and testified of the truth that is in you.

Just as you walk in the truth, I have no greater joy than to hear that my children walk in truth. Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers who have borne witness of your love before the church. If you send them forward on their journey in a manner worthy of God, you will do well.

Because they went forth for his name's sake, taking nothing from the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such that we may become fellow workers for the truth. I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves 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. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.

He who does good is of God, but he who does evil has not seen God. Demetrius has a good testimony from all, and from the truth itself. And we also bear witness, and you know that our testimony is true.

I had many things to write, but I do not wish to write to you with pen and ink. But I hope to see you shortly, and we shall speak face to face. Peace to you.

Our friends greet you. Greet the friends by name. Now, here there's a number of people to identify.

The elder, of course, we've already discussed who that is. I believe it's the Apostle John. There's this man, Gaius, who's the chief recipient of the letter.

In fact, as far as we know, the only recipient of the letter. This is not written to a church, but to a man. There's another man, Diotrephes, who is said to be domineering.

He loves to have the place of honor, the first place. He loves to have preeminence in the church. Much to the point where he probably is jealous of the influence that an apostle like John would have.

And he tries to insulate the church from John's influence. Probably. We actually don't know what Demetrius might be teaching.

Demetrius might be teaching false doctrine, but John doesn't go into that. Maybe that's some of the things he wants to talk to Gaius about when he comes to see him. But the real issue doesn't seem to be the teachings, the specific things Diotrephes is teaching, but his power grab.

His intention to dominate the church. His teachings may or may not be heretical, but even if they're not heretical, he's like a cult leader. He doesn't want the congregation to

hear anyone but him.

Even the Apostle John and the messengers he sends are not welcome. And if anyone happens to anger him by actually showing hospitality to John's friends, this man throws them out of the church. I mean, think of the kind of power this man is wielding.

And John says, don't imitate him. Imitate the good person, Demetrius. Now, he's a good person.

Everyone says he's a good person. So imitate him. Don't imitate people like Diotrephes.

Now, there's some other groups of people like the ones he calls the brethren and the ones he calls the friends. He said, and there's also strangers. Verse 5 says, Beloved, you do faithfully whatever you do for the brethren and for strangers.

And then he talks about at the end, greet the friends by name. Now, some of these groups probably are overlapping. But in so short an epistle, he uses quite a variety of ways of designating people.

Strangers, brethren, friends. I think the basic thing that is obvious is that John has been sending brethren, co-workers of his, from his church to the church where Diotrephes is dominating with some kind of messages. But the message isn't getting through because Diotrephes doesn't receive the messengers and definitely intimidates anyone who might want to do so.

So it's basically keeping the church from hearing anything from John and his messengers. This may be why John's doing an end run around Diotrephes by writing to Gaius, a church member. He's writing directly, not to the church, but to Gaius.

Because he knows Gaius is one of the good guys. He has sent messengers to that church and Gaius received them and housed them. He's one of the ones who brooked the disfavor of Diotrephes by receiving John's messengers.

And so John knew he could trust him and writes him a letter. He says in verse 8, I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes wouldn't receive us. Actually, an alternate reading that some manuscripts read in verse 9 is, I would have written to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves the pyramids, wouldn't receive us.

In other words, he might be saying, I didn't write to the church, I would have, but I didn't bother because the letter would never get through Diotrephes. So I'm writing to you instead of to the church. And I know you're a good guy because I've heard reports.

The brethren that I sent before, who you hosted in your home, they've come back and they've told me about your hospitality that you showed to them. You do well in doing this. He commends him for this.

So he actually begins his letter by commending Gaius for this. Now Gaius, who is Gaius? We don't know. Gaius was an extremely common name in the Roman world.

Gaius is just a very, very common name like the name Jim or John or Bill in our culture. And so this could be any Gaius. There are some other Gaius's mentioned in the New Testament, but there's really no reason to associate this one with any of them.

There was a Gaius along with Aristarchus that were companions of Paul and traveled with him. And they are mentioned in Acts 19.29. They were Macedonians traveling with Paul. This man, there's no reason to associate him with him.

Paul mentions a Gaius in Romans 16.23 who was Paul's host in Corinth. Paul was writing Romans from Corinth and he sends greetings from Gaius who was his host, who was Paul's host and the host of the whole church, he said. So maybe even the church met in Gaius's home in Corinth.

But that's not probably who John's writing to either. John's friends were largely a different circle than Paul's. Because John circulated mostly among the Jews in the early part of his ministry while Paul was establishing Gentile churches.

And then later after Paul died, John established himself in Ephesus which was one of Paul's churches. But John's circle was, this would be almost like a generation or half a generation after Paul probably had even died. And therefore different people are in John's circle than were in Paul's circle in all likelihood.

Geographically, John probably wasn't writing to someone in Corinth or a Macedonian at all but probably someone in Asia where John lived and where he oversaw the churches there. We really don't know where Gaius lived, what church this was. Apart from this letter, we don't know anything about this Gaius or about Diotreus or Demetrius.

These are all names that we know only from the epistle and we have to put together from it alone everything we can know about them. Now what I find interesting is what this epistle tells us about the way church government developed. Diotreus clearly had a position in the church that put him in power over everybody.

And anyone who, you know, displeased him, he could put them out of the church. Now it says that at the end of verse 10 and the verb putting them out is the same verb that's used in John chapter 9 when it talks about how the blind man that Jesus healed was put out of the synagogue, excommunicated. As the blind man was cast out of the synagogue, according to John 9.34, the same verb is used of how Diotreus throws people out of the church.

Now in the days of Paul, nobody in the church had that kind of authority except an apostle. The apostles didn't set up churches with one man leadership. They didn't want there to be dictators in the church.

And so we read in Paul's letters and in Paul's actions in the book of Acts that he established in the churches elderships, groups of elders. There was never even as far as we know a case where one pastor was in a church. There's no mention in the entire New Testament of a pastor of a church.

But the churches had elders, plural. Now these elders were pastors, that is, they did the work of shepherding. The word pastor means shepherd.

And the elders were commanded to shepherd the flock. Paul called the elders of the church of Ephesus in Acts 20 and told them in verse 28 to shepherd the flock of God. That is, pastor the church.

You elders of the church, pastor them. Watch over the sheep. We saw just a moment ago in 1 Peter chapter 5, Peter did the same thing with the elders.

In 1 Peter 5.1, he said, the elders who are among you I exhort. And he goes on to say, shepherd the church of God which is among you, taking the oversight of it. So they were the elders, which was a body of men in every congregation, not one man, but several, were shepherding the flock.

These men were not given political authority at all because Jesus forbade it. Jesus had said to his disciples, the rulers of the Gentiles exercise authority over them, but it shall not be done that way among you. He said, whoever will be chief among you must be the slave, the servant of all.

It's the opposite. It's not top-down authority in the church. Jesus never authorized there to be authorities over the flock.

They are supporters underneath the flock. The chief ones are the ones who make themselves the servants of all, Jesus said. That's what we read in Matthew chapter 20, for example.

Matthew 20, 25, Jesus called his apostles to him, and they were going to be the leaders of the church, of course. And he said, you know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them. Yet, it shall not be so among you.

But whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave. Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.

Leadership in my kingdom is upside down compared to the worldly kingdoms, which have top-down authority. We have bottom-up authority. Those who serve the most are the most like Jesus.

Those who are most like Jesus have the most to say to the church and value to the church. And therefore, actually we actually live at a time where these instructions of Jesus have been violated for so many centuries that virtually every church is set up exactly like a worldly corporation. Board of directors, you know, all that stuff.

I mean, there's hardly any difference in the church government of modern churches than there is in a worldly corporation. And so, it's sort of like it is with the rulers of the Gentiles. Many, many pastors feel like they can lord it over the sheep.

I thank God there are pastors who don't feel that way. Pastors at the church I attend are definitely an exception. They don't try to lord it over the people.

But there are certainly pastors who think, I'm the big cheese here. I built this church with my fantastic preaching. All these people are here to hear me.

I can command a big salary. I can tell people what to do. If people don't do things my way, I can kick them out.

They can be like doctrines who love to have the preeminence. Loving to have the preeminence means loving to be first. As you said, anyone who wants to be first, let him be the servant of all.

The servant doesn't kick people out of the church who displease him. That's the opposite of a servant. That's being the big boss, the tyrant.

We can see that by the time John wrote this, which was probably late in the first century, the church had degenerated this much. Paul had set up groups of men who kept each other in check. No one was able to be the boss of the church.

Just many men who were older men in the church. If older, probably more Christ-like because of their spiritual maturity. They were recognized by Paul.

These are the guys I think everyone should follow. These are the guys whose testimonies and whose examples are good examples to follow. Notice, even in this later point, John says, don't imitate the bad ones.

Imitate the good ones. That's what he says here in 3 John. He says in verse 11, Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good.

It was still understood, even though Demetrius was an example of a really bad leader, it was still understood that leaders are to be imitated, not obeyed. In the rules of the Gentiles, the exercises are there to be obeyed. In the church, the leaders are those who provide an example.

And that's what Peter said in 1 Peter 5 to the elders too. When he's giving instructions to the elders, in 1 Peter 5, 3, he says, Nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but

being examples to the flock. It's a totally different concept of leadership.

This is a family, not a corporation. And the younger children learn how to behave by watching the older children. Not by the older children bossing them around.

That's not the role of the older children. That's what the dad does. The dad's the boss.

The older children have learned the ropes, have learned what the father wants more than the younger children have. And therefore, the younger children can watch them and learn from their example. That's how the church is set up.

The most mature people are the ones, not who give orders, but who influence through their example. Say, well, whoever you see that's the most Christ-like, follow his example. Don't follow the one that's got a bad example.

But Diotrephes was already acting as if that wasn't the way it's done. It's not about examples. It's about giving commands.

And he was commanding the church. So we can see the church going through this corrupting stage, which it later exhibited through the rest of its history. There's such a shift between the time of the apostles, and John was living at the tail end of that time, and the churches were beginning to have this kind of shift, and he didn't approve of it.

But he couldn't stop it all by himself. The other apostles were dead by this time. And we see in the second century, the early second century, probably shortly after John died, the letters of Ignatius, which are still available to read.

He wrote seven letters to seven churches, and Ignatius lived at a time where this shift had become complete. They had what historians now call a monarchical bishop. Monarch is at the root of that.

A monarch bishop. A king bishop. And if you read the letters of Ignatius, he wrote seven letters to seven churches.

Now he was probably a good man. He actually wrote his letters as he was being transported, I think it was from Antioch, where he was a bishop, to Rome, where he was fed to the lions. And he anticipated being fed to the lions, and as he was traveling to Rome, he wrote these seven letters.

I believe he was a good man, but his letters reflect the way that the church had morphed in his day, because he's concerned about disunity in the churches. And his solution to disunity is, obey the bishop. Everyone obeyed the bishop.

Already the word bishop was singular in the church. In Paul's day, the bishops were the elders. There was no church that had a bishop.

They had overseers. That's what the word bishop means. Episcopoi.

Their elders were overseers. They supervised. They didn't command.

They just watched over the flock like a shepherd does. And what had happened by about the year 115 AD, that's not very long after John died, Ignatius' letters testified as something that had shifted, and now the churches had a bishop, and everyone had to obey the bishop. Ignatius' letters say you can't baptize anyone unless the bishop's there.

You can't perform a marriage ceremony unless the bishop's there. You can't take communion unless the bishop's there. Everything has to be done under the eye of the bishop.

The reason was, and it was well-intentioned enough, there's division in the church. The easiest and most carnal way to solve division is to put one man in charge, so everyone obey him. Well, that's exactly how cults operate.

They have perfect unity among themselves because everyone obeys the cult leader, or gets kicked out. That's what the church became. It became more like a cult than like a family.

That's not the way it was done in Paul's day. It's not the way John wanted it to be done. But you can see that Diotrephes was either the first monarchical bishop, of which we have any record, or else he was the problem that monarchical bishops were raised up to solve.

People take in charge of the church who were not godlike. And so it may be that eventually the church decided we'd better pick guys who are godlike and make them in total control so that guys like Demetrius who come up can be controlled by the good guy bishop. It's hard to know how to avoid this kind of thing when a church is maybe no longer led by the Holy Spirit and it has to work like an organization.

But I believe that as long as the church is led by the Spirit and people love each other and are humble, you pretty much don't need to run like an organization. You run like a family. I was for years not attending a regular church at all, not because I'm against fellowshiping with regular churches, it's just hard to find a church that would tolerate me.

Not because I'm a troublemaker, but because there's a lot of things different. And so it was hard to find a church to work with because, I don't know, they were all institutionalized and so I fellowshiped with home groups. And in the home groups, no one was in charge.

There was no boss. Even the church I was in in Idaho had 150 people in it. No one was the pastor.

There were no elders. No one was appointed leaders, but there were older men. They didn't have political authority over anyone else, but people knew who the older men were and would listen to what they had to say.

What they said didn't become law for the church because they weren't exercising authority like the rulers and the Gentiles, but everyone in the church wanted to do what's right and they recognized some men knew God longer. Some people knew the Bible better. Some people's advice was more Christ-like than others.

And so people just, there's sort of an almost an organic sorting that takes place. No one needs to be given a title. You're the boss now.

We do what you say. It's rather, I know who it is in the group I fellowship with who's more mature than someone else. I know who I'm going to go to for advice.

I know who, when they speak, it's more weighty in my thinking than someone else who speaks who doesn't know as much. It's not political. It's not a corporation.

It's not a top-down government. It's a family in which the Holy Spirit leads everybody to recognize who is speaking to them for God at any given time. And of course, in any group like that, some people are going to be older Christians or whatever and they will typically be recognized.

He's an older, he's an elder. That doesn't mean he now is the boss. It just means when he speaks, I give some weight to what he has to say.

He's got some experience or whatever. And this is very organic. And that's why there's a movement today among people who don't like the institutional church and they call it the organic church movement.

Organic because the church is a body. It's an organism. Jesus didn't set up an organization but an organism, a body.

And you can tell that Demetrius is already turning his congregation into an organization with him as the leader. John, who was the truest leader of all but the servant of all, did not approve of him but he also didn't come in with a whip and drive him out. Instead, he appealed to the faithful saying, don't follow the example of that person.

Follow the example of the good person. Demetrius, he's a good person. Now, we don't know anything about Demetrius except that John thought he was a good person.

And that if you're going to follow someone's example, follow his, not Diotrephe's. And so, I mean, this letter is incredibly short and tells us very little specifically about anyone. We don't know specifically what Diotrephe's taught or whether his teaching was heretical.

It may have been, may not have been. It was not the issue. The issue was the politics of

the church.

The issue was the sociology of it. See, I've said for a long time that while I think most Christians define a cult by the heretical teachings. For example, most Christians will say a group's a cult if they don't teach the Trinity.

But you know what? Some groups teach the Trinity. I'd still call them a cult because the sociology of the group, the domineering leadership, the assumption that if you're here, you're going to agree with that guy. If you don't, you're going to be kicked out.

That's a sociological phenomenon that I think is cultic. It's like a personality cult. And that's what Diotrephe was turning the church into, a cult under his leadership.

And this is a scary epistle in many respects because it's the only testimony we have in Scripture to this morphing of the church from what the apostles originally set up, what Jesus set up, into what it became eventually in the Middle Ages. It became a monstrosity under a tyrannical pope who could excommunicate or torture anyone he wanted to if they didn't comply. And he could terrify anyone with the threat of excommunication.

They had to do whatever he wanted because if he excommunicated them, they're going to hell, they thought. And so this is how the church corrupted. And in the letter, 3 John, John is concerned about that, obviously.

But John didn't live long enough to see how bad it really got. But we can see in retrospect the beginning of this bad trend where instead of the church having leaders that are examples to follow, men were putting themselves into positions as being leaders to give orders. And fortunately, there's a lot of Christians now who don't think that's the right way to do it anymore.

But for centuries and centuries, that's the only model of church that was around. And whenever someone disagreed with the popes, whether it was the Waldenses or the Bogomils or the Albigenses or the Paulicians or the Hussites or the Wyclophites, the Lollards, these were different groups before the Reformation that disagreed with the pope and had some... sometimes they were a lot more scriptural. A lot of them were like what Protestants later were, but they got stamped out.

That's what the Inquisition was for, to kill these people, torture these people, bring them into compliance. That monstrosity of the church became... you can almost see it's starting to be that way here. And by the 2nd century, we see Ignatius' letters saying, don't do anything without the bishop there to authorize it and to be the boss.

He doesn't say the boss, of course, but that's what you get when you read Ignatius' letters in like 115 AD. Just shortly after this, already the churches are now being commanded by somebody who's the boss of the church, and nothing can be done without his oversight and without his approval. It got worse still, but that's... I find this

little epistle just really a unique one in that respect, that it sort of is the transitional form, like the missing link between the ape and the man, or in this case, between what was a man becoming a beast, which is what the church became for a long time.

So anyway, not much more needs to be said about this epistle, or if it does, we don't have time to say it. We're going to wind it down and just quit here, but these are the concerns that John expresses in these two epistles. Concerns about false teachers coming into the church in 2nd John, and problems with the evil leadership within the church in 3rd John.

Both of them, no doubt, are instructive in view, especially of church history, what happened, and whatever remnants of this remain in our time.