

Conflict and Community in 3 John. Dealing with Diotrophes

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Conflict in churches is almost a universal phenomenon in the modern situation and, according to research by Hoge and Wenger in the USA, one of the two major cause of ministers giving up their vocation within the first five years (Hoge and Wenger, 76f). Furthermore, Churches are notoriously poor at dealing with conflict, unsure how to proceed when believers, and *a fortiori* in the case of leaders, lapse into attitudes and modes of conduct that deny its very premise, namely the forgiving, reconciling love of Christ in the fellowship of the Spirit. Most pastors will experience conflict and challenges to their leadership at some point in their ministry and the response to this can determine whether a ministry becomes more secure and enriched or whether it becomes stunted or even shipwrecked. According to Hoge and Wenger, the ability to manage conflict is a key characteristic of pastoral competence and seminaries should do more to prepare ordinands for the challenge (Hoge and Wenger, 202f).

3 John reflects a disputation between leaders about the nature and exercise of spiritual influence in one early Christian community. This letter only exists because ‘the elder’ was forced to make a personal appeal to a church to raise publicly the issue of Diotrophes’ behaviour in contesting his authority (the name “Diotrophes has Greek roots and means “child of Zeus,” which may suggest an aristocratic background. See Painter, p.373). I propose therefore to try and unpack as much as possible about the nature of their dispute from the limited details provided in the text.

Who is the elder?

3 John does not identify the author of the letter beyond the self-designation Ο πρεσβυτερος. Presumably no name was required to be added, though it is hardly a personal greeting to such a beloved friend suggesting that the letter was intended for a wider audience. The title “the elder” originally meant ‘old man’, but also came to be used for anyone exercising oversight and leadership. It was used for leaders in Jewish communities and early Christian communities, however its use in 3 John has proved puzzling on a number of counts. First, the term as it is used in relation to church order in the New Testament is nearly always in the plural and for the title to be given to an individual breaks all the rules (Campbell, 208). The problem is that if the author is *an* elder why does he call himself *the* elder? Second, why does he use this title to address a church with which he is clearly not in regular contact? Third, if he functions as some sort of overseer (επισκοπος) why does he call himself the elder (πρεσβυτερος)? The only plausible answer is that the term ‘elder’ was somewhat flexible in its use and could refer to those who performed a variety of leadership

functions which later came to be known by more precise titles. If this is the case, then here is someone whose authority is that of an overseer but calls himself an elder. According to Schweizer, “the elder” means he is regarded by the recipients as a highly esteemed prophet or teacher without reference to rank or office (Schweizer, 128).

In a well known saying of Papias, in a treatise entitled *Interpretations of the Oracles of the Lord* (preserved only by Eusebius, HE 3:39:4), he states that the apostle John was also known as “the elder John” in similar fashion to Peter’s self-designation as “your fellow elder” in 1 Pet 5:1. This would make it possible to identify the author of 3 John as John the son of Zebedee, the author of the Gospel and the epistles. It has been argued against this hypothesis that firstly, “the presbyter” would be an unexpected self-designation for the Beloved Disciple (Brown, 95) and secondly, Diotrophes would hardly have been likely to oppose “the elder” if he were such a venerated figure in the early church and a companion of Jesus. In response, Marshall reminds us that Paul, even though he was acknowledged as an apostle could be viciously attacked by his opponents, according to the Corinthian correspondence (see Marshall, 44).

The other interpretation of Papias is that there was another John, known as “the elder” who was also a disciple of the Lord but not to be identified with John the apostle. This has led to the suggestion that John ‘the elder’ was a disciple of John the apostle and is responsible for the writings which bear his name. Brown suggests he may have been the redactor of the Gospel (Brown, 95).

What is clear is that the elder considers himself to be the bearer of rightful authority, not necessarily in a formal ecclesiastical sense but according to divine appointment, in relation to the community in which Diotrophes also exercises power, thus making leadership a contested issue.

The situation of the church in 3 John

The identity of the church in 3 John is one of the puzzles of the letter. The simple statement in v.9 “the church” is ambiguous and could refer to a single local congregation to which both Gaius and Diotrophes belonged. However, this is unlikely since Gaius would hardly require to be informed about what Diotrophes was doing in his own church. A second proposal is that it could refer to a neighbouring church to that of Gaius where Diotrophes is the principle ‘leader’ (φιλοπρωτος), literally, ‘of them’ (αυτων). This would explain why the elder does not exhort Gaius to intervene in the situation but makes it known that he will deal with the issue when he comes in person. The problem with this view is whether it does justice to the phrase “the church” which appears to have in view a single community which the elder, Gaius and Diotrophes have in common.

A more satisfying proposal can be constructed from Maier's work on the social setting of the early church. He argues that at the end of the first century 'the church' was still structured around separate households (see Roms 16:23; Philemon 2) whose leaders were people of independence, importance and sufficient means who were able to receive or refuse those who came as representatives of other churches and hold their own meetings if they wish (Maier, 147-156; also Malherbe, 223f). It would be fascinating to know more about the role and the status of the Christian patrons in whose houses the church would meet. The events concerning Paul and Silas in Thessalonica (Ac 17:5-9) suggest that such a patron had legal responsibility for those meeting in their homes and if the patron took a position of authority over the community it might explain why the elder was having such difficulty imposing his own authority on the church.

Some such house church arrangement appears to lie behind the Johannine letters in which a number of groups are established at a distance from the author in and around a major urban centre (regarding the possible date and location of Ephesus see Smalley, xxii, xxiv; Brown, 98f). It is against this background that we can interpret the actions of Diotrephes who had taken the position of senior leader in the church and was now seeking autonomy for community by negating the influence of "the elder".

The charges against Diotrephes:

1. He loves the first place. The participle *Φιλοπρωτευων* appears here for the first time in Greek literature, though the noun *φιλοπρωτος* is well attested (see BDAG, 1058). Danker's definition in BDAG gives it the meaning, "to have a special interest in being in the leading position" or "wish to be first, like to be leader" with a focus on controlling others (ibid.). The cognate adjective of the term is used by Plutarch to describe a tyrant, which may be apt in this circumstance (Painter, 373). The language suggests a note of bitter resentment in his attitude towards the authority of the elder.

A common reading of the situation tries to see things from Diotrephes' point of view and to envisage the situation when the system of oversight by the founding apostles and evangelists was coming to an end to be replaced by the development of independent churches on a more formal and complex basis of governance. By the early second century we can trace the growth of the so-called "moniscopate" in which an 'overseer' came to occupy the primary place of leadership in a church, superior to that of the "elders" (See Campbell, 216-235). It would appear that Diotrephes coveted such a position and found his ambitions thwarted by the elder. It is tempting to speculate that Diotrephes was impatient with a system in which a giant of the past was ruling a church from a distance while he, a younger man *in situ* was prevented from bringing new vision and momentum to a church facing opportunities and challenges. Such a scenario would not be fanciful to anyone who has been involved in

local church leadership. Whatever his motive, the elder regards his attitude and ambition to be motivated by arrogance and a demonstration of unchristian conduct.

Diotrephes is a perpetual warning against the danger of confusing personal ambition with zeal for the Gospel and the church (see Marshall, 90). Smalley describes him as a man with “an egocentric lust for power, which he had confused with zeal for the gospel” (Smalley, 356). For this reason the elder may well be referring to Diotrephes when he instructs Gaius in v.11 not to imitate evil, but good.

2. The second charge against Diotrephes in v.9 is a failure in relation to *επιδεχέσθαι* (to receive) which is used again in v.10 (found only in these two verses in the New Testament). On both occasions Diotrephes is the subject of the verb which in the first instance concerns his relationship with the elder and those with him - *υμας* and in the second, the emissaries of the Elders - *τους ἀδελφους*. A literal translation would be along the lines, “he does not receive us” or “will have nothing to do with us” (see Smalley, 356). In both cases the emphasis is on the lack of reception, as can be seen in the translation of Jerome, “Diotrephes . . . does not receive us . . . neither does he himself receive the brethren” (see Mitchell, 300). This parallel translation stands in stark contrast to many contemporary English translations which treat *επιδεχέσθαι* differently in v.9 and v.10. V.9 is typically translated “does not acknowledge our authority” (NRSV; c.f. BDAG: p.370) but in v.10 “to welcome someone as a guest.” Margaret Mitchell attributes this modern phenomenon to the influence of Walter Bauer who ascribed discrete meanings to the word in the two adjacent verses in the first edition of his Greek-English Lexicon (1928). (Mitchell, 301) The importance of this issue is more than simply semantics, it affects whether one regards the historical issue behind the letter as ecclesiastical in nature, contending for “authority” over the *ekklesia* (as does Schweizer who accuses Diotrephes of wanting to be the monarchical bishop in the church. See Schweizer, 128), or a matter of diplomatic hospitality, as Malherbe has argued (227f). Malherbe contends that *επιδεχομαι* should be translated the same in both cases as a reference to the receipt of emissaries from the elder in whose name they act. This he regards as an issue of power rather than authority as such, though to refuse the elder’s emissaries implied a rejection of his authority also.

The charge against Diotrephes specifically relates to a letter which the elder has sent to the church, the authority of which was rejected, and which may have been suppressed. In consequence of this the elder has now written to a trusted colleague Gaius and sent the letter by the hand of Demetrius to ensure its safe transmission to the church as a whole. The purpose of writing again, this time to Gaius, is so that the elder’s words and thereby his authority might be received and acknowledged by the church.

3. The third charge is that “he is gossiping maliciously,” ‘prating’ as the RSV has it. *Φλυαρῶν* is a pejorative term literally meaning “babbling,” “vituperative nonsense” (Zerwick and Grosvenor: 736) or “words of wicked nonsense” (Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*: 357), “disparaging or badmouthing us” (BDAG: 1060). In 1 Tim 5:13 the adjective *Φλυαρός* is used to describe the pernicious behaviour of the younger widows with time on their hands.

There is no indication in the letter of the nature or content of the slander, but most church leaders would recognise the seriousness of this form of opposition and undermining of authority. According to Walter Bauer the conflict of words between Diotrephes and the elder was more than personal slander, it was rooted in the theological struggle between “orthodoxy” and “heresy” taking place within the Johannine community (Bauer, 93). He views Diotrephes as one of the anti-Christian secessionists referred to in 1 Jn 2:18-19 and again in 2 Jn 7-11. This judgement is based on the emphasis we find in this letter on the “truth” (vv.1, 3 twice, 4, 8, 12 twice). Painter argues the same conclusion based on the overlap of language concerning evil deeds and evil words (Painter, 364f). Clearly truth is a major concern to the elder in both 2 and 3 John, however if Diotrephes was teaching heresy it is difficult to imagine that the elder would not make clear reference to this. In any case the elder is now dealing with a situation that cannot simply be ignored

4. Diotrephes refuses to welcome ‘the brethren’. The situation envisaged in 3 John is one in which the evangelistic and pastoral ministry of the church depended largely on peripatetic missionaries who travelled throughout the environs of Ephesus proclaiming the message of the gospel and offering guidance and assistance to the various churches. In the ancient world where inns were few and unreliable most travellers relied on private hospitality to provide for their basic needs (Malherbe, 223 ; Edwards, 24). To this extent the personal well-being of peripatetic missionaries was dependent on the generosity of the believers to whom they ministered, though there was also the possibility of exploitation by charismatic personalities and impostors as described in the *Didache* 11. In 2 John 10-11 the elder instructs the church not to receive or greet (*χαίρειν*) anyone who should come among them with a false doctrine, namely an antichrist who preaches a docetic view of Christ (the same instruction is to be found in Ignatius, *To the Smyrneans* 4:1; *To the Ephesians* 9:1. Ignatius shows the widespread nature of this problem in Asia Minor). Any greeting, or hospitality offered, would be regarded as support for and solidarity with, their false teaching, which is to be wholly discouraged.

In contrast to Diotrephes, Gaius is commended in v.5f for his hospitality to travelling preachers, for this is “God’s service.” His action is described as “acting loyally” or “faithfully” (*πιστον ποιεις*), though the specific nature of the faithfulness is not specified. It

could possibly mean that he is faithful in performing this task of welcoming the brothers. It could also mean that by this action Gaius demonstrated his faithfulness to the “truth” for which he is commended in the opening greeting and by which the elder means authentic Christianity because it is an expression of his love (c.f. v.6). Marshall (85) suggests that it might have the more specific meaning of being faithful to the elder and those associated with him whom Diotrephes, by comparison, refuses to welcome (v.10). In this case the “strangers” are also the “brothers” and brotherly love is expressed in hospitality. If this is the case then Gaius was being asked not only to welcome them but by so doing to express his loyalty and allegiance to the truth of the presbyter’s cause and theirs, which is to be “fellow workers in the truth” (v.8b).

5. He prevents others from welcoming ‘the brethren’ and puts out of the church those who do so. According to the Johannine epistles the crucial test of authentic faith is love, and in this regard Diotrephes has failed. It is not enough that he will not personally provide hospitality for visiting missionaries, he prevents others from doing so and puts them out (εκβαλλει) of the church if they defy him on the issue. There is no question at this stage of church history that formal excommunication is implied by εκβαλλει (cf. John 9:35 with reference to being put out of the synagogue). However, it is clear that excluding a member of a church from fellowship was an accepted norm of discipline as is clear from Paul’s instruction in 1 Cor 5:2, 7, and it is possible that Diotrephes had already arrogated to himself the right of expulsion. Malherbe (229) argues that Diotrephes was exercising his right as the householder, the head of the house, to exclude from the house church those he considered to be undesirable. The unfortunate irony of this situation is that Diotrephes may well have been using the teaching of 2 Jn 10, which forbids the welcoming of false teachers and denies them the right to hospitality, to pay back the elder in kind. Painter (354) takes this view and argues that the elder and Diotrephes regarded each other as doctrinal opponents but since it is the emissaries of the elder who are denied hospitality they are implicitly accused of heresy and Diotrephes has cast himself in the role of defender of orthodoxy (as Käsemann first proposed). If this were the case it would not be hard to appreciate why the elder was so anxious to visit ο φιλοπρωτευων in person and to deal with the threat posed.

Dealing with Diotrephes

In this situation where the pastoral and apostolic authority of the elder over his community the elder forewarns Gaius that he will “take up the matter” with Diotrephes (So Marshall, 91). The NIV “I will call attention to what he is doing” is an insipid rendering of the text (for a strong use of υπομιμνησκω in a similar kind of context see Wisdom of Solomon 12:2). Presumably “taking up the matter” means that the elder has no power or

authority to depose Diotrephes or remove him from his position therefore the elder will have to rely on his supporters within the church to endorse his discipline of Diotrephes. The fact that the letter is addressed to the church suggests that Diotrephes would not be receptive to the missive sent by the elder. The aorist tense *εγραψα* denotes a completed action in the past, hence it refers to a letter already sent, which is possibly implied by v.10. If so, then we know how Diotrephes responded to a previous missive, namely it was rejected thus placing himself above the elder in the governance of the congregation. It is not clear whether the elder intended to confront Diotrephes in private or in public before the whole church, the latter appears to be suggested. While it is sometimes easier to be bold in public where the dynamics of confrontation are altered by the presence of an audience, it is surely not for any such reasons that the elder would choose a public arena for dealing with Diotrephes. His concern is more likely to be that Diotrephes has used his position to undermine the authority of the elder, and therefore the elder's authority can only be restored by public recognition of the rightful order of leadership in the church. In any case, the elder sets a example for other church leaders by demonstrating wisdom and courage in tackling the heart of the issue in a direct encounter with the man who is undermining and discrediting his authority in Christ.

In the following section, vv.11-12, the elder does not mention Diotrephes by name but his shadow falls over the instruction to Gaius not to imitate the bad but rather the good, the latter being presumably a reference to Demetrius. Demetrius, who is almost certainly the bearer of the letter to Gaius, possessed a strong testimony (*μεμαρτυρηται*) from those who knew him, and *της αληθειας* (the truth), to be of sound character. If Diotrephes is still in view in vv.11-12 then the elder's verdict on this would-be leader of the church is that his evil conduct in slanderous word and inhospitable deed bears witness that he does not belong to God. Whatever the formal relationship between 1 and 3 John, there is an echo here of the same theology we find in 1 Jn 3:6 "Everyone who sins has not seen God nor has known him."

Reflections that arise from the text:

In this final section I want to offer a number of personal reflections on this study of the disagreement between "the elder" and Diotrephes in 3 John.

1. How do we respond to conflict in the church? Is conflict of some sort or other an inevitable and inescapable dimension of living in close proximity to other human beings? The evidence of life suggests this is so. In one of the testimonies reported by Hoge and Wenger (76) Frank, an 'ex-Pastor' comments, "I would say conflict is essential. If there is no conflict in a church, I would point to a church that's probably doing nothing." If this is true to any degree there is no need to be dismayed, frightened or thrown into panic by the eruption of conflict within a church setting. The New Testament is very realistic about the expectation that believers who are indwelt by the Spirit of Christ will not always get along with one

another harmoniously. “Conflict may be viewed as a strong indicator that people are invested, that they really care about their church” (Hoge and Wenger, 77). It is not a failure of discipleship to experience a breakdown of relationship with a brother or sister in Christ, it is a failure of discipleship to do nothing about the estrangement. The teaching of Jesus in Matt 5:23-24 and 18:15-17 both presuppose that there will be occasions when members of the Christian community will need to seek reconciliation and provides a means by which this might be achieved.

2. People in positions of church leadership are especially vulnerable to conflict because there will be a proportion of church members who feel that they could fulfil the task of leading the church equally as well, if not better, than the minister. The personal nature of Christian faith means there will be a variety of competing visions for the ministry and priorities of the church among its members. Some members will desire the church to spend more time in prayer, others will desire more effort in evangelism, some will want to put praise and singing (in the belief that this is the essence of worship) top of the agenda, others are irritated by too much singing and long for longer, deeper Bible teaching sermons (yes, these people really do exist). The person who has to negotiate the manifold agendas for the soul of the whole church community and to hold all that is needful and good in tension is the leader. Thus, tension comes with the task of leadership, it is in the job description. It is not a sign of malaise when it breaks out, it comes with the territory.

3. Conflict in the church requires of leaders a strategy to deal with people and with issues and the courage to implement the strategy. “The elder” clearly identifies the specific behaviours of Diotrephes that demand to be dealt with and promises to address these specifically when he comes in person to the church. When leaders feel under threat from another individual it is important to keep in focus the actions which are causing the strain, and not to slip into negative thoughts about attitude, which personalises the conflict and makes it more difficult to effect reconciliation and resolution of the issues. Vague personal accusations easily come to dominate the conflict, “X doesn’t communicate”, “I don’t feel valued by Y”, “Z is arrogant and uncaring”. The elder sets an example of itemising specific behaviours which can be confronted, discussed, and if necessary repented of. There may be colleagues we have to work with that we may never be on friendliest terms with, but it is possible to function effectively for the good of the greater cause we all serve by having a strategy to deal with issues that create friction and the determination to implement this.

4. The love of power and the power of love. Diotrephes was evidently a man who had been seduced by the love of power in the Christian community. There are numerous warnings in the teaching of Jesus about the desire for power, see Mark 9:33-37; Matt 20:25-28, 23:5-12. Power is the necessary force to do work and it is an essential quality in any form of

effective leadership. Jesus was himself described as a man of power and authority. But Jesus specifically addresses the misuse of power and the selfish ambition which might lead some of his followers to desire power for their own sake and not for the good of others and the accomplishing of kingdom goals. Ministers need to be on their guard against the corrupting effect of power. When appointed as leader of a church we are given power over an institution, over finance, other members of staff. When people become ministers when they have had little or no experience of managing others or responsibility for an organisation the power thrust upon them can be daunting or intoxicating and in either case it can lead to problems.

It is interesting that the discussion among the disciples in Mk 9:33ff concerned who was the greatest, which Jesus posed as a lust to be “first” (πρωτος).

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