

Disdainful Pride and Dishonorable Deeds

In 3 John 8-9, John tells Gaius about one who has made himself an adversary: Diotrephes. As Diotrephes is not mentioned anywhere else in the Scriptures, or in any other literature, it is extremely “difficult to say what the basis of this animosity is.”¹ The possible causes are “a disagreement over *polity*, a difference over *doctrine*, or . . . a combination of the two.”² But, doctrine is not the issue, because “3 John does not mention doctrine at all.”³ As Stott says, “If the truth of the gospel were at stake, ‘the elder’ would surely not have hesitated to expose the error in the same uncompromising [and specific] language which he had used in the first and second letters [of John].”⁴ Therefore, it is better to understand Diotrophes’ wandering from the truth not as heterodoxy, but as *heteropraxy*—falling short of right behavior. As John wrote in another place, “But whoever has the world’s goods, and sees his brother in need and *closes his heart against him*, how does the love of God abide in him? Little children, let us not love with word or with tongue, but in deed and *truth*” (1 John 3:17–18, emphasis added). The subsequent descriptions of Diotrephes make his wickedness plain. John makes six charges of sin against Diotrophes: two regarding his pride and four regarding his deeds.

Disdainful Pride (2 John 3:9)

The first two charges John makes are about Diotrophes’ sinful attitude. John “wrote something⁵ to the church,” which was a *specific* local assembly of believers, but apparently, Diotrephes did not accept its instruction. And thus, as a warning, John begins to tell Gaius about his sin.

Diotrophes “loves to be first among them.” ὁ φιλοπρωτεύων αὐτῶν” is prepositive to Διοτρέφης, thus highlighting Diotrephes’ “desire to be first.”⁶ The word “φιλοπρωτεύων” only occurs once in the NT; it has been define variously: “personal aggrandisement,”⁷ “a penchant for controlling others,”⁸ to desire “the supremacy himself,”⁹ or most literally, “who loves to have first place” (HCSB). The word is rightly understood as general description of a proud person, for

¹ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 225.

² Smalley, *1, 2, 3 Johns*, 354–355, the two hypothetical scenarios under polity are (1) Diotrephes is an elder or (2) Diotrephes is a grass-roots, “charismatic type.” The two scenarios over doctrine are (3) Diotrephes is a heretic denounced by 2 John and his heresy has overtaken the church, or (4) Diotrephes is orthodox but the writer of 3 John is the heretic. To be too specific seems speculative and unprofitable.

³ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 46. See also D. A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed., (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 681–682. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 Johns*, 356, proposes that the conflict was over both polity *and* doctrine, pointing to the pervading theme of truth (vv. 1, 3, 4, 12). While this theme is indeed present, it is a far cry from identifying a specific heresy that Diotrephes was propagating.

⁴ Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 233.

⁵ The verb ἔγραψά is in the aorist active tense, which means it is an action completed in the past, and is rightly translated, “I wrote.” It cannot be an epistolary aorist (that is referring to the act of writing 3 John) for Diotrephes has already rejected John’s instructions. See S. S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, vol. 51, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 353; John R. W. Stott, *The Letters of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 19, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988), 232–233.

⁶ Joseph Henry Thayer and Christian Gottlob Wilke, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Being Grimm’s Wilke’s Clavis Novi Testamenti* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Pub., 1999), 5383..

⁷ David Smith, “The Epistles of John,” vol. 5, *The Expositor’s Greek Testament: Commentary* (New York: George H. Doran Company, n.d.), 207.

⁸ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 1058. Quoted in Robert W. Yarbrough, *1, 2, 3, John*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 378.

⁹ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 19:234–235.

pride leads to all the other sinful behaviors of self-elevation, self-love, selfish ambition, desire to lord it over others, rejection of legitimate authority, and particularly, a “refusal to accede to the elder’s written request that he provide hospitality to those whom the elder recommended.”¹⁰

But pride always has an audience. Diotrophes is said to love being first among αὐτῶν, most likely a reference to the church John wrote to. This means that, somehow, in his pride Diotrophes had exalted himself over the church, probably aggregating authority that he did not deserve, and holding influence that exceeded his godliness.

The second charge John makes is that Diotrophes “does not accept what we say.” Most significantly, Diotrophes rejected apostolic authority. While οὐκ ἐπιδέχεται ἡμᾶς has been translated various ways,¹¹ the most straight-forward rendering is “[he] does not receive us” (HCSB, NKJV), for it parallels the usage of “ἐπιδέχεται” in verse 10 (see below). The word “ἐπιδέχεται” appears only twice in the NT, both in 3 John, and means “to receive into one’s presence in a friendly manner.”¹² Thus to *refuse* to receive someone in this manner is to completely reject them. Diotrophes didn’t merely fail to be hospitable; he scorned believers.

John says that Diotrophes “does not receive *us*,” indicating that rejecting his letter and the commended brethren is “the same as rejecting the elder himself”¹³—yet, not only him, but “us,”¹⁴ that is, a rejection of all those who are associated with John, those who submit to the truth.¹⁵ By such a sinful, rebellious attitude, Diotrophes had set himself as diametrically opposed to the children of God.

Dishonorable Deeds (2 John 3:10)

The next charges John makes against Diotrophes are his sinful deeds: “(i) malicious gossip about the elder and his community; (ii) refusal to welcome the orthodox missionaries; (iii) preventing others from doing so; and (iv) putting out of the church those who defied him in this matter.”¹⁶

First, Diotrophes was using “wicked words [λόγοις πονηροῖς]” to disparage John and his associates. The verb “φλυαρῶν” literally means “talking nonsense”¹⁷ but carries the connotation of disparaging and malicious words.¹⁸ A good rendering is “slandering us with malicious words” (HCSB).¹⁹ While John does not tell Gaius the contents of the slander, by using this specific verb, he patently rejects the slander as empty nonsense.²⁰ Those who love to exalt themselves will

¹⁰ Colin G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 226.

¹¹ NASB translates as “does not accept what we say.” ESV and RSV translates as “does not acknowledge our authority.” For a refutation of this rendering, see Arndt et al., *BDAG*, 370.

¹² Ibid. Nida adds “listen or pay attention...with resulting conformity to what is advised or commanded.” Johannes P. Louw and Eugene Albert Nida, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (New York: United Bible Societies, 1996), 467.

¹³ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 226–227.

¹⁴ This is similar to how he uses the plural pronoun in 1 John 1. Stott, *The Epistles of John*, 233 argues that he is using “the plural of authority” here. But this does not explain why John used the singular “I” in the other parts of the letter.

¹⁵ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 51:357; Yarbrough, *1, 2, 3, John*, 378; Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 226–227.

¹⁶ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 227.

¹⁷ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 51:357–358.

¹⁸ Arndt et al., *BDAG*, 1060. The cognate noun is in 1 Tim 5:13, and is often rendered as “gossipers” in English translations.

¹⁹ ESV has “talking wicked nonsense against us.” NRSV has “spreading false charges against us.”

²⁰ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 51:357–358.

invariably seek, by any means possible, to subject all perceived competitors to themselves;²¹ Diotrophes is no exception.

Secondly, Diotrophes was refusing to “receive the brethren.” This is the second usage of “ἐπιδέχεται”; by using the word twice in two verses, John says that just as Diotrophes did not receive John’s letter, but instead rejected it, he also does not receive the brethren hospitably, but instead rejects them. The “brethren” most naturally refers to the same brethren mentioned in v. 5.²² This again heightens Diotrophes guilt, for it contrasts him to Gaius. Diotrophes failed in everything that Gaius succeeded in; he did not “send them on their way in a manner worthy of God” (v. 6), was hindering the work done “for the sake of the Name” (v. 7), and was forsaking being a “fellow worker[] with the truth” (v. 8). These are merely the bad fruits of pride; as Stott says, “Self-love vitiates all relationships.”²³

Thirdly, Diotrophes was forbidding those who wanted to be hospitable from carrying out that hospitality.²⁴ The verb κωλύει is used only once in John’s writings, which “frequently is used in the NT to connote the wrongful obstruction of the progress of something *that ought not be opposed*.”²⁵ and provides a chart detailing all the times the verb means “to hinder.”²⁶ All of the usages of the verb in relation to *persons* signify strong opposition.²⁷ By condemning Diotrophes with this word, John calls him an opposer of God Himself. The proud heart seeks to steal the very glory of God.

Fourthly, Diotrophes puts the believers who desire to be hospitable “out of the church.”²⁸ While Kruse writes that “[i]t is not clear whether this constituted an official act of excommunication or not,”²⁹ John’s choice of words is telling. In v. 10, “ἐκβάλλει” is paired with “ἐκ”; this same construction is used in John 2:15. Five other times in the gospel of John, he uses a similar construction.³⁰ In each of these six instances, the sense is that someone was “*force[d]* to leave, drive[n] out, [or] expel[led].”³¹ This provides strong evidence that Diotrophes was not following the formal process of church discipline,³² but instead had “arrogated to himself the task of “expulsion,” and was actually driving people out of the congregation”³³ with his own self-appointed authority. What devastating irony; he who was commanded to receive the brethren was casting the brethren—and all who desired to serve them—out of the church!

²¹ “Diotrophes evidently regarded John as a dangerous rival to his own assumed authority in the church and sought to undermine his position by slanderous gossip.” Stott, *The Letters of John*, 19:235.

²² Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 228; Yarbrough, *1, 2, 3, John*, 379.

²³ Stott, *The Letters of John*, 19:235.

²⁴ While this is the only time John uses the participle “βουλομένου,” verbal forms of βούλομαι are used in John 18:39 and 2 John 12. In these two cases, it is used to signify a simple want or desire.

²⁵ Yarbrough, *1, 2, 3, John*, 379. Emphasis mine.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 379–80. He also notes that there are “neutral or favorable semantic situations (Acts 8:36; 16:6; 27:43; Heb. 7:23; 2 Pet. 2:16).”

²⁷ “Mk 9:38f; 10:14; Lk 9:49; 11:52; 18:16; Ac 11:17; 3J 10.” Arndt et al., *BDAG*, 580.

²⁸ The definite article in the Greek “τῆς ἐκκλησίας” means that this church is same local assembly mentioned in v. 9; this implies that Diotrophes threw fellow members out of the church for opposing his proud desires.

²⁹ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 228.

³⁰ John pairs a form of “ἐκβάλλω” with “ἔξω” instead of “ἐκ” in John 6:37, 9:34, 35, and 12:31. The only other time he uses the verb is John 10:4, which is *not* paired with either “ἐκ” or “ἔξω” (and significantly, where it does not mean *forcibly* put out.)

³¹ Arndt et al., *BDAG*, 299.

³² The word “ἐκβάλλω” is never used to describe formal church discipline or formal church excommunication in the NT.

³³ Smalley, *1, 2, 3 Johns*, 358.

Conclusion

John the apostle wrote a letter to the church where Diotrephes was, asking him to be hospitable to the brethren that traveled to him. But Diotrephes refused, rejecting John's apostolic authority and the brethren sent by him—and thus the entire community of the truth. His problem was not doctrinal per se, but his pride, his love to be first above all and the deeds that flow from such a sinful heart. This is the devastating of pride in a leader: it consumes and corrupts all love for God and love for neighbor.

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