

13. Power Struggle (3Q 2009—Loved and Loving: John’s Epistles)

Biblical material: Isa. 14:13, 14; Mark 9:35; 1 Cor. 12:7–31; 1 Corinthians 13; Phil. 2:3; 3 John; Rev. 14:6.

Quotes

- Power doesn’t corrupt people. People corrupt power. *Anon*
- Power is never good, unless the one who has it is good. *King Alfred*
- Power gradually extirpates from the mind every humane and gentle virtue. *Edmund Burke*
- The power that is supported by force alone will have cause often to tremble. *Lajos Kossuth*
- The essence of government is power; and power, lodged as it must be in human hands, will ever be liable to abuse. *James Madison*

Questions

Why is power in human hands so dangerous? And would not infinite power be even more dangerous, even in the hands of God? What should give us confidence about how God uses power and how he solves the “power struggle” in the great controversy? How should we react to abuses of power, even in the church?

Bible discussion

“Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.” (3 John 11 NIV). Through the three personalities mentioned in this letter we see three models of Christian behaviour in the church. Which one we choose to imitate is up to us, but we should be under no illusions what the different results will be. Churches dominated by one personality are frequently battlegrounds. Our membership can be scarred by involvement in churches that see Christian ethics and standards replaced by power struggles, with all the unchristian behaviour that comes as a result.

John has to deal with one such congregation under the repressive tyranny of Diotrephes, who seems to act like a petty dictator. In his letter, John shows that his principle of loving one another *means* taking a firm stand against such influences, which have their root in the practices of the Devil. What is the real danger? That church members see the way such leaders operate, and either leave, or *imitate such behaviour themselves*. Both courses of action severely damage the church and compromise its gospel witness.

If we see a need, we should try to meet it. Like Gaius who did not try to make it another’s responsibility, we should try to help. John wrote of these visiting church workers, who didn’t ask help of unbelievers, preferring rather to rely on the generosity of their fellow Christians. Concludes John: “We Christians, then, must help these people, so that we may share in their work for the truth” (3 John 8 TEV).

Through malicious gossip, a refusal to accept other church leaders, and the abuse of church power, Diotrephes demonstrates that though he claims to have the truth, the truth is not in him. A philosophy of “the end justifies the means” characterizes those in the church who seek to further their own ambitions at the expense of true Christian conduct: “Diotrephes, who loves to be first” (3 John 9). In this self-love Diotrephes follows the precedent of Satan, who desired to be first—even above God (see Isaiah 14 and Ezekiel 28).

The temptation to self-aggrandizement is one that has affected individuals and churches, and inevitably leads to sub-Christian behaviour. In seeking to be pre-eminent and “lord” it over the others, any such “church dictator” is in direct opposition to the words of Jesus: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you” (Matthew 20:25, 26 NIV).

The highest commendation of God is that you have said and acted rightly. In contrast to the power-seeking and pride of Diotrephes, Demetrius is an example of one who follows the Lord’s “requirements”: “To act justly and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God” (Micah 6:8 NIV). Like Job at the end of his troubles and worries, God announces “he has said of me what is right,” unlike Job’s “friends.”

To this commendation John adds his own testimony that Demetrius is someone he trusts, and emphasizes the point by saying “and you know our testimony is true” (3 John 12 NIV). See how much trust there needs to be among true Christians. We are to imitate not evil but good (3 John 11, 13, 14). Unfortunately it often seems that people choose to copy bad examples more than good ones. John closes this brief letter with this primary thought—find out what is good, and make sure to imitate that. Trustworthy leaders are hard to find in this world, and church leaders should truly be models of good behaviour and sound teaching. Without being proud and arrogant, it is not wrong to encourage others to follow what is good in any leader. For “whoever does good belongs to God” (3 John 11 TEV).

Like the early church, today’s church has many problems, outside and in. Consequently we all need to make sure we are imitating the good, and living true and honest Christian lives. The greatest goal is to hear from God His commendation, as we enter into eternal fellowship with Him and all the saved from every age.

Comment

“To *walk in* (RSV, ‘follow’) the *truth* is more than to give assent to it. He who ‘walks in the truth’ is an integrated Christian in whom there is no dichotomy between profession and practice. On the contrary, there is in him an exact correspondence between his creed and his conduct. Such conformity of life to the truth on the part of his children brought John *greater joy* than anything else. To him truth mattered. He did not regard theological issues as unimportant trivialities. It was from truth, believed and obeyed by his children, that he derived his greatest joy.” John R W Stott, Epistles of John (London: Tyndale Press, 1964), 219-220.

Ellen White Comments

Beloved, I wish above all things that thou mayest prosper and be in health, even as thy soul prospereth. 3 John 2. God wants each one of us to find his place, and when each one is in his place, doing the work that God has given him, there will be perfect unity. . . . {UL 157}

The pure, those who are good and do good, are very near to Jesus. The disciple whom Jesus loved most was John, because he was the closest imitator of His character and was imbued with the spirit of love. {11MR 26}

You have the pattern, Christ Jesus; walk in His footsteps, and you will be qualified to fill any and every position that you may be called upon to occupy.... You are not to feel that you are a bond slave, but a son of God. (3 John 3 quoted {SD 283})