

HOW TO RECOGNIZE WHEN THE SPIRIT OF DIOTREPHES IS DOMINATING YOUR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

You probably have not heard many sermons on the NT model for “lording it over the church” – that would be the infamous Diotrephes that the aged Apostle John called out in his brief third epistle:

I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say. For this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words; and not satisfied with this, neither does he himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church. Beloved, do not imitate what is evil, but what is good. The one who does good is of God; the one who does evil has not seen God.

Obviously this is an extreme case since the offending church leader is characterized as speaking “wicked words”, practicing what is “evil” and not even being included in the family of God. However, this example is provided to help churches guard against the incipient introduction into spiritual leadership of this root sin of “loving to have the preeminence.” Christ warned His disciples often about their own tendencies to practice evil in this very respect: of following the hierarchical Gentile model of “Top Dog” leadership which involves dominating those under you vs the biblical model of a plurality of undershepherds functioning as a team with a servant mentality. (**Matt. 20:25-28**)

You need to ask yourself why you have not heard much teaching about this in today’s church culture. But that is a question for another day. At this point I am not trying to debate what the NT teaches regarding the proper model for local church government. I have been studying this subject of church leadership intensely for over 35 years. I have been involved in a wide range of evangelical church structures – from independent churches, to Plymouth Brethren, to PCA, to Baptist, to Christian Missionary Alliance, etc. Some churches might have a congregational model; some might be elder-led; some might have a denominational structure above the local church level. That is not the issue here. I am talking about how the leader or leaders function in this one particular area: are they characterized more by the sinful practice of lording it over the flock or by the godly practice of being humble servants? There are many other aspects of leadership that merit consideration but are beyond the scope of this investigation. Should leaders be strong and directive? Yes . . . but they still can not be lording it over the sheep. Should your church be characterized by expository preaching? Yes . . . but you cannot use the pulpit to lord it over the flock.

Having said that, there is one important fundamental characteristic of church leadership that must be present in every local church: the Lord Jesus Christ must be exalted as the Head of both the universal church and every local church body. That is who must have the preeminence. Anything that compromises or detracts from His leadership undermines God’s program for this age. For the purposes of being specific in my examples I am going to assume a plurality of elder structure. That structure may or may not have one elder designated as the “Senior Pastor.” You can find either selfish ambition or humble servanthood in either situation. The model is not the issue here – that is not to say that the model is unimportant or would not provide some helpful checks and balances. You can apply the examples to whatever structure characterizes your situation.

So what are some ways that you can recognize that the spirit of Diotrephes is dominating your local church leadership?

The root problem is Pride; but since we cannot look into the heart we must examine the words and actions of leaders to try to see whether they are functioning as humble servants or abusive dictators. **Dr. John Piper** has this to say about Pride:

Pride is the failure to realize deeply that without Christ we can do nothing. And so the proud heart starts to feel that it can be self-reliant. And then it begins to feel that it is indispensable. And then it starts to act that way and exalt itself and seek the praise of men.

[http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/872_Who_Shall_Shepherd the Flock/](http://www.desiringgod.org/ResourceLibrary/Sermons/ByDate/1994/872_Who_Shall_Shepherd_the_Flock/)

Walter Chantry has this to say:

Arrogance and an overbearing spirit is never acceptable in elders. Popish demeanor reveals pride in the heart. Pompous and tyrannical treatment of subordinates almost universally attends positions of authority in the world and in human institutions. Never is such deportment permissible in elders. Our Chief Shepherd has said, "Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you"! (Matthew 20:25,26)

All of these characteristics may not be present . . . but here are some good indicators:

- A Diotrephes will be more concerned about building up and protecting his own reputation rather than looking out for the interests of others and making sure that they are promoted. It is all about self promotion and self exaltation. It is all about demanding respect from others and reacting very defensively when they feel that respect is not forthcoming.

(Philippians 2:3-5)

- A Diotrephes will lay burdens and restrictions on others that he is not willing to take upon himself. (**Matt. 23:1-4** – speaking of the unsaved Pharisees – but still has some application here) He might lay out a very detailed path for how someone can prove themselves to be ready to assume various leadership responsibilities. But he did not have to prove himself in similar fashion and submit to others in the same way that he is calling on you to submit yourself. He might even have demonstrated problems in submitting to leaders over him in prior situations in his younger years.

- A Diotrephes would not be able to function peacefully in leadership with another person just like himself. There is room for only one Diotrephes in a given assembly. That is a key distinguishing point. If two people are both striving for the preeminence you will necessarily have conflict. Examine your leader(s) and see if they would be able to continue to function effectively if another person like them were to be on the leadership team. Examine the church at Antioch (**Acts 13**). They had a number of very prominent leaders all able to minister together. That is how you come up with church planting teams that you can send out to start other ministries. (So the argument that you should only have one preacher because otherwise you would be wasting the talents of the other person(s) does not hold up.) The one-man dominated concept means that you have to ship developing talent off to seminary with the

expectation that they will find their own way into some independent situation where they can end up as the chief shepherd.

- A Diotrephes has difficulty receiving ministry from someone else in the local church. He must always be in the dominant position of having superior giftedness, superior wisdom, superior experience, superior vision, etc.

- A Diotrephes has difficulty respecting the contributions and importance of the other members of the leadership team. He will try to enforce his own will and agenda, even when the majority opposes him. He may allow another elder to take the lead in an area where he does not want to spend the time; but he will reserve for himself those areas of ministry that he deems most important. He may be manipulative in trying to accomplish his purposes. He may be sincere in believing that he knows better what is in the best interests of the flock, but that is no excuse for lording it over the other leaders.

- A Diotrephes may verbally acknowledge that his teaching should not be accepted at face value since it is not infallible. He may even encourage the biblical practice of the Bereans checking out what is taught and interacting with appropriate questions or refutations so that the truth can ultimately be determined. But in practice he will react very defensively to criticisms of his teaching. People will not view him as approachable in this area.

John Reisinger quoting **Walter Chantry**:

Some elders never appreciate the compliment given them when a saint disagrees with the pastor's exposition of a text. At least the Christian under his care is devoted more to Scripture than to the man in the pulpit. Under his ministry the child of God has reached a maturity to think through issues for himself and has imbibed a Berean spirit (Acts 17:11). But some ministers cannot endure the process of maturing in the sheep. At times parents are so flattered by the dependence of children that they cannot bear to see them grow independent with passing years. A swollen image of self-importance suffers too much for them to relinquish the reins. It is even so with domineering ministers. . .

Lording it over the flock provokes church fights and splits. A domineering spirit in elders provokes mature men of strong minds and independent judgment to leave the church. These very ones would have the greatest potential for future leadership in the assembly. Dictatorial measures make lesser men craven and dependent, stunting their true growth. But it also has its harmful effects on the "lords over God's heritage." It makes them egotistical and self serving.

http://www.batteredsheep.com/leave_part_02.html

- A Diotrephes will assert that God's Word is our ultimate authority and we cannot just accept every person who comes at us with some subjective claim to be a "prophet" or "spiritual" (**1 Cor. 14:37-38**) – but in the same breath he will try to validate his ministry position and practices with reference to a very subjective "call to the full-time ministry". He views himself as God's anointed mouthpiece for the church in some special category where he is above the comparison to the objective standard of God's Word. You will find his speech littered with references to what he has accomplished – "my ministry," "my pulpit," "my church" . . . etc. How is this any different from a charismatic referencing their personal experience as validation for their speaking in tongues, etc.? You can say that all was accomplished only by

God's grace ... but your attitude can contradict this testimony and reveal that to some extent you are boasting in yourself similar to the words of Nebuchadnezzar in **Daniel 4:30**.

- A Diotrephes will form close relationships with other like-minded rulers who have a similar unique (almost dictatorial) role in other churches. They stand in some special class that is distinguished from the other mere helper elders. They are deserving of all sorts of special privileges and perks beyond just the scriptural mandate of being worthy of "double honor" for working hard at preaching and teaching.

- A Diotrephes will be overly critical of other spiritual leaders in order to elevate his own status. He tends to have a competitive approach to those who share a similar giftedness.

- A Diotrephes views himself as making great sacrifices for the work of the Lord. He works hard and puts in long hours – make no mistake about that. But he is blind to his own ambition of actually trying to build up a kingdom for his own rule. He views himself as misunderstood when it comes to the unique pressures and obligations he has assumed because of his unwillingness to allow others to come alongside and govern at the same level.

- A Diotrephes may use the pulpit ministry to defend his ministry or attack potential threats in ways that are inappropriate. Rather than personally and directly responding to people who approach him with concerns about his ministry style, he may lash out against them from the pulpit.

- A Diotrephes seeks to position people in leadership who are loyal to himself rather than having the priority on whether that person is needed to minister to the flock and meet the needs of the people. This will cause him to hesitate and delay putting men into the leadership roles appropriate for their character development via the Holy Spirit. Instead of relying on the biblical requirements for deacons and elders, there will be the insertion of some unnecessary man-made limitations to allow for the showing of favoritism based on loyalty to the chief leader.

- A Diotrephes will respond differently to people based on his perception of the degree of their personal loyalty to him and his ministry. For example, he might exercise different standards of confrontation and church discipline towards different people. This is a form of showing favoritism.

- A Diotrephes may try to explain away the perception that he is overbearing by making reference to the authoritative nature of the text of Scripture he is proclaiming. He is about a sober and serious business so it should be no surprise that some people react against that by wrongly considering him to be too strong and overbearing. However, the authority of the text does not carry over to an excuse for overly authoritarian shepherding. He must reflect the compassion and love of Christ in his dealings with the people.

- A Diotrephes may actively seek to weed out from the church those that he views as not willing to fall in line under his dictatorial style. He will size up visitors from this perspective and discourage certain ones. He will discourage others who are members until they come to the point where they see no alternative but to withdraw from membership. All of the time he uses a repressive climate of fear to make sure that people do not talk among themselves about any of these sinful tendencies they perceive. If they come to him personally with their

concerns, they feel that they stand alone with no one else supporting their observations. Unity is maintained by one person having strong control over the doctrine and ministry style and vision and direction of the church. Independent thinking is discouraged. When people leave the church there are no exit interviews where the other leaders can investigate whether people have some legitimate concerns that should be investigated.

- A Diotrephes will make reference to other well-known Christian leaders, preachers and authors as being supportive of his leadership style – whether or not that is actually the case. This will strengthen his position in the eyes of the congregation and give them reassurance.

- A Diotrephes will respond to pressure by blurting things out via email or via spoken communication that are harsh and unkind and not fully representing the truth of the situation. They may involve lies, slander, bearing false witness, rewriting history, packaging up former events to present himself in the best possible light, etc. (**Matt. 15:18-19**)

- A Diotrephes loves titles of distinction and places of honor that recognize him for his seminary training, his superior gift of edification and his length and breadth of experience in the full-time ministry (**Matt. 23:5-12**). How does being called “Senior Pastor,” “Reverend,” “Chief Pastor” mesh with Christ being the one and only “Chief Shepherd”?

- A Diotrephes will usually have a history of issues with anger management. Instead of being patient and gentle in correcting those that disagree, he will have a tendency to fail to fully listen, to lash back too quickly and too harshly and to exacerbate the level of the conflict. He will not have the spirit of a peacemaker. He thinks he has a right to more respect and submission than what he is receiving. He will have difficulty placing himself in the shoes of the other party. He has a major problem admitting he has been wrong in any area of decision making.

- A Diotrephes will argue that there is no way whether you can know for sure that he is lording it over others in the congregation because you are not privy to all of the confidential aspects of the situation. Even if you hear complaints from another individual that is only one side of the story. That does argue for restraint in bringing such charges. However, you do know the particulars of your own interaction with the leader and can speak with confidence to that area.

- A Diotrephes will look like a **Taskmaster**:

Strong's gives this definition for taskmaster: "Captain, a head person, keeper, lord, master, ruler,..." Many pastors today seem to get the idea that they are the supreme ruler. What they say goes, no debate. They take the verses like Heb. 13:7, *"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation,"* and Heb. 13:17, *"Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you,"* to try to justify their dictatorship. They begin to think, "I am the Lord, and there is none else."

The first place the word taskmaster or taskmasters appears in Scriptures is in Ex. 1:11, *"Therefore they did set over them taskmasters to afflict them with their burdens. And they built for Pharaoh treasure cities, Pithom and Raamses."* What did the taskmasters do? They afflicted them with their burdens. The word burdens means, "That which is borne or carried; a

load. Hence, that which is borne with labour or difficulty; That which is grievous, wearisome or oppressive."

You see a taskmaster assigns someone a task, a definite amount of business or labour. They burden them with some task, and they *require* them to perform it. No wonder God's people today are getting weary in well doing. Many pastors are taskmasters, they are assigning tasks, requiring church members to perform, burdening them down with a heavy load.

What ever happened to believing that Christ is the head of the church?

<http://www.baptistpillar.com/bd0409.htm>

- Interesting article: Where are the Pastors? By Keith Giles, 12/29/08
<http://www.theooze.com/articles/print.cfm?id=2164&process=flash>