OVERVIEW OF BOOK OF 3 JOHN –
REBUKE OF DOMINEERING CHURCH LEADERSHIP

INTRODUCTION:

The book of 3rd John bears many similarities to 2nd John – only 15 verses and written by the Apostle John right before the end of the first century. However, I find it to be one of the saddest records in the entire Bible. It highlights 3 men – Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius – actually 4 if you count John himself. But the key character is the villain of the story – Diotrephes who exemplifies a domineering and toxic style of church leadership. I find this especially distressing because I have spiritual battle scars from encountering such men myself in different church contexts over nearly half a century living in Baltimore. [but no time for my personal examples]

My youngest daughter Julie is about to give birth to twin boys in less than 3 weeks. Her three-year old has a nice biblical name = Titus. But you won't find any Moms naming their sons Diotrephes. While the other 2 men have much to commend them, Diotrephes is specifically called out by John as someone who resisted apostolic authority and governed his local church from a mindset similar to the famous cartoon character Yertle the Turtle. I can't resist reading just a small snippet: as Yertle the Turtle perches himself on top of a tower of poor oppressed turtles:

> *Then Yertle the Turtle was perched up so high,*
> *He could see forty miles from his throne in the sky!*
> *"Hooray!" shouted Yertle. "I'm king of the trees!*
> *I'm king of the birds! I'm king of the bees!*
> *I'm king of the butterflies! King of the air!*
> *Ah, me! What a throne! What a wonderful chair!*
> *I'm Yertle the Turtle! Oh marvelous me!*
> *For I am the ruler of all that I see!"*

We laugh as we read this to our toddlers. But we cry when we see this scenario acted out in our churches.

It sounds very similar to the prideful description of the **King of Babylon** who is energized by Satan that we find in **Isaiah 14:13-14**

> "*But you said in your heart, 'I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God, and I will sit on the mount of assembly in the recesses of the north. 14 I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.*'"

T. S. Eliot: "most of the troubles in the world are caused by people wanting to be important." "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" – Lord Acton

Let's **read** the short epistle – note how the 2 bookend characters of Gaius and Demetrius are **commended** and then focus on the stinging rebuke John administers to Diotrephes at the core of the story.

John begins by identifying himself as "*The Elder*" just as he did in 2nd John –

I. (:5-8) FELLOWSHIP IN THE TRUTH INVOLVES SUPPORTING ITINERANT GOSPEL WORKERS

A. (:**5-6**) Commendation for Supporting Itinerant Gospel Workers
   1. (:**5**) Demonstration of Faithfulness
   2. (:**6**) Demonstration of Love

B. (:**7**) Vulnerable Status of Itinerant Gospel Workers

C. (:**8**) Material Support of Itinerant Gospel Workers = Fellowship in the Gospel

II. (:9-12) FELLOWSHIP IN THE TRUTH INVOLVES EXPOSING EVIL AND IMITATING WHAT IS GOOD

A. (:**9-10**) Negative Example of Diotrephes – Exposing Domineering Leadership

B. (:**11**) Principle = Imitate What is Good

C. (:**12**) Positive Example of Demetrius – Commending Faithful Leadership

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Before we dive into the details of this story, I want to remind you that in our previous studies we have already been able to define the **consistent church government pattern** that we see in the NT: that is a plurality of qualified, godly men functioning as elders, pastors, shepherds, overseers – all the same office – without any differentiation of one man at the top of some hierarchical structure. So it is governance by a plurality of elders.

Now I want you to see clearly that Diotrephes is operating as the **primary leader** of this local church and very likely the sole leader. Whatever his official designation, senior pastor, bishop, sole elder, leader among leaders – I don't know the designation. But we can see **how he is functioning** – and it is not within the confines of the biblical pattern:

- He is setting himself up as the **supreme authority** in the church – even disputing the legitimate authority of the apostolic writings – that is shocking – so there are no checks and balances – He is the Supreme Court – the ultimate decision maker
- This is not some type of cult setting. John is writing to an existing Christian church that teaches **sound doctrine** with respect to the person of Christ and with respect to the gospel message. John doesn't see any need to make any doctrinal corrections. This is not a doctrinal heresy that is being addressed. He is probably an excellent preacher and definitely a strong charismatic leader with a powerful personality
- He constantly demonstrates his **ambitious motivation** and heart desire:

  He loves to be first / He loves to have the preeminence / He wants to be top dog in leadership and respect and power and prominence

  Remember **Col. 1:18** – speaking of Christ – "*He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the first-born from the dead; so that He Himself might come to have first place in everything.*" Diotrephes wants to be the head of the church

  So we don't have to guess at his motivation – John spells it out for us
- He leads with i**ntimidation** and **fear** tactics; He is a **master manipulator**; he **slanders** legitimate spiritual leaders with wicked words

- He chooses which itinerant ministers are **loyal** to him and forbids the reception and support of any he deems disloyal or those who do not serve his purpose of advancing his own kingdom
- He even uses the extreme disciplinary tool of **excommunication** to remove any threats to his leadership and to maintain loyalty and unity in the assembly

His actions are so pervasive and so wicked that John indicates that he has failed the moral test of **1 John** with respect to **salvation**. He actually "*does evil*" and thereby proves that he has no connection to the living God. Now the spirit of Diotrephes which we see around us today is typically not as extreme and would not always lead to such an evaluation that the individual is not even saved. Scripture typically highlights the supreme case example to make the point that would then apply to all lesser instances. But regardless, **domineering** and **toxic** church leadership must be called out as contrary to the type of **servant leadership** exemplified and commanded by the Lord Jesus.

Study the **qualifications** of church leaders in the NT –

- **1 Tim. 3:3** *not pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money* (or any other perks that may be associated with a leadership position)
- **Titus 1:7** *For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, but hospitable*

Certainly Diotrephes should be excluded from leadership just on the basis of miserably failing the qualifications

Remember the **exhortation** that Peter gives: **1 Peter 5:2-3**

> *shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock*

Then Peter goes on in **verse 4** to make a very important distinction that the men like Diotrephes might give lip service to but their actions reveal their heart attitude:

When the Chief Shepherd appears -- You see the elders are delegated authority as **undershepherds --** The **Chief Shepherd** is the Lord Jesus, the **Head of His church** – the one with all authority – the one who wants to shepherd and guide and protect his flock.
That's one reason I resist elevating one elder above the others as the **Senior Pastor** – how is that different than calling him the **Chief Shepherd**?? The nuances are very slight.
We will come back to this point a little later.

So how is it that such a man could be in control of a Christian assembly – especially during a time period when the apostle are just fading off the scene?

How could the early church be so far off base? This is shocking. We need some **historical perspective** from the OT to see how spiritual leadership has always been a challenge for God's people. We actually should not be surprised.

If most Christians were asked to identify the first king of Israel, I am sure that the answer would be Saul. Anointed by Samuel at the direction of the Lord, he proved to be a disappointing king in contrast to David who would come after him. But generations before in the book of Judges **Chap. 9** we have this sad tale of **Abimelech**, a self-made king. He stands for everything that is wrong with ambitious, one man rule – with self-appointed grasping at leadership rather than submitting to divine appointment.

Just before this the people tried to make Gideon king, but he rejected their offer in theory although compromising his behavior and in some key respects acting like a king. Now Gideon has departed from the scene. He leaves behind 70 sons from his many wives and Abimelech, the son of his concubine in Shechem.

Big Idea: **ONE MAN RULE THAT LORDS IT OVER THE SHEEP USURPS GOD'S PREEMINENT ROLE AND RESULTS IN A REIGN OF FUTILITY THAT CULMINATES IN DESTRUCTION**

I. (9:1-6) CORONATION OF A WORTHLESS, DESTRUCTIVE KING – PREEMINENCE PURSUED FROM SELFISH AMBITION – WRONGLY ESTABLISHING ONE MAN RULE USURPS GOD'S RIGHTFUL POSITION OF PREEMINENCE

A. (:1) Initiative for One Man Rule is Selfish Ambition

> "*And Abimelech the son of Jerubbaal went to Shechem to his mother's relatives, and spoke to them and to the whole clan of the household of his mother's father, saying,*"

Abimelech was raised to feel like an outsider – never on an equal footing with Gideon's other sons; always with the stigma of his mother being just a concubine rather than a wife with full privileges and respect. Given his personality and desire to have the preeminence, he was always looking for an opportunity to go to the head of the class. He ended up presenting his case for leadership to his mother's relatives – a relatively easy sell! He had no concern for God's program for leadership or for discerning and implementing God's will. He was driven by **selfish ambition.**

B. (:2a) Rationale for One Man Rule is Human Wisdom / Expediency

> "*Speak, now, in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem, 'Which is better for you, that seventy men, all the sons of Jerubbaal, rule over you, or that one man rule over you?'*"

"*Which is better for you*?" What about God's plan?? Think about how often we disappoint God because we make decisions independently of seeking His will. We decide on the basis of what we think is the best course for us.

C. (:2b-3) Support for One Man Rule is Blind Loyalty and Blood Connection

> "'*Also, remember that I am your bone and your flesh.'" And his mother's relatives spoke all these words on his behalf in the hearing of all the leaders of Shechem; and they were inclined to follow Abimelech, for they said, 'He is our relative.*'"

D. (:4-5a) Implementation of One Man Rule is Ruthless

"*And they gave him seventy pieces of silver from the house of Baal-berith with which Abimelech hired worthless and reckless fellows, and they followed him. Then he went to his father's house at Ophrah, and killed his brothers the sons of Jerubbaal, seventy men, on one stone.*

E. (:5b) Opposition to One Man Rule is Precarious

"*But Jotham the youngest son of Jerubbaal was left, for he hid himself.*"

II. (9:7-15) CARICATURE OF A WORTHLESS, DESTRUCTIVE KING – PARABLE OF THE BRAMBLE KING --
WAVING IT OVER EVERYBODY ELSE IS ULTIMATELY A FUTILE ROLE THAT NEGATES YOUR OWN GIFTEDNESS AND STIFLES THE GIFTEDNESS OF OTHERS

A. (:7) Parable Introduced in a Bold Setting – Calling the Men of Shechem to Account

"*Now when they told Jotham, he went and stood on the top of Mount Gerizim, and lifted his voice and called out. Thus he said to them, 'Listen to me, O men of Shechem, that God may listen to you.'*"

This is the first parable recorded in Scripture – a very powerful medium for communicating a simple message.

B. (:8A) Parable Illustrates the Incongruity of the Human Initiative in Anointing a King -- What Happens When the Inmates Try to Run the Asylum

"*Once the trees went forth to anoint a king over them*"

C. (:8B-13) Parable Interrogates Various Candidates for One Man Rule -- Three Examples of Leaders Who Reject the Opportunity to Lord it Over Others

not willing to forsake God-given productivity for the allure of preeminence but actually the reality of futility

Case of the Olive Tree / the Fig Tree / the Fruitful Vine

D. (:14-15) Parable Indicts the Self Promotion of the Worthless Bramble

"*Finally all the trees said to the bramble, 'You come, reign over us!' The bramble said to the trees, 'If in truth you are anointing me as king over you, come and take refuge in my shade; but if not, may fire come out from the bramble and consume the cedars of Lebanon.'*"

I'm happy to do it (since I am not all that productive anyway); but you must then be loyal to me. Imagine a bramble king! It was the most worthless tree imaginable, but it had delusions of grandeur.

III. (9:16-21) CURSE FROM JOTHAM DIRECTED TOWARDS A WORTHLESS, DESTRUCTIVE KING AND THE MEN OF SHECHEM –
PRIORITY ON TRUTH AND INTEGRITY
WARNING THE WICKED OF THEIR IMPENDING DESTRUCTION

A. (:16-19) Actions Based on a Life of Truth and Integrity Lead to Rejoicing

"*Now therefore, if you have dealt in truth and integrity in making Abimelech king, and if you have dealt well with Jerubbaal and his house, and have dealt with him as he deserved-- for my father fought for you and risked his life and delivered you from the hand of Midian; but you have risen against my father's house today and have killed his sons, seventy men, on one stone, and have made Abimelech, the son of his maidservant, king over the men of Shechem, because he is your relative-- if then you have dealt in truth and integrity with Jerubbaal and his house this day, rejoice in Abimelech, and let him also rejoice in you.*"

Key Question for Leadership: Are you acting in accordance with Truth and Integrity?

B. (:20-21) Actions Based on a Life of Deception and Disloyalty Lead to Destruction

"*But if not, let fire come out from Abimelech and consume the men of Shechem and Bethmillo; and let fire come out from the men of Shechem and from Beth-millo, and consume Abimelech. Then Jotham escaped and fled, and went to Beer and remained there because of Abimelech his brother.*"

The ignominious end of Abimelech reflects God's judgment on domineering one-man rule:
Judges 9:53 *a certain woman threw an upper millstone on Abimelech's head, crushing his skull.*
Vs. 56 *Thus God repaid the wickedness of Abimelech*

Gary Inrig: We need to remind ourselves at this point of the basic lesson of **Judges 9**. If God is not King, a usurper will arise in His place. If God had been kept in His place as King, Abimelech would never have been successful. When there is a spiritual vacuum, Satan will rush in to fill it

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1 Samuel 8 describes the transition from a theocratic form of government to a monarchy. Samuel's sons were not distinguishing themselves but were turning aside after dishonest gain and taking bribes and perverting justice. Surprise! Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

So the elders came to Samuel at Ramah and demanded: "*Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.*" That language should be a major red flag to you. Israel was not intended by God to be like all the nations. But they could not deal with trusting in the invisible God. They wanted a point person, a visible top dog that they could rely upon.

How did God view this request? No problem, it's time for our leadership model to evolve?

- The thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel – he knew it was a sinful request
- It was also displeasing in the sight of God – "*they have rejected Me from being king over them*" – Is it a good thing to reject God's leadership?

GOD'S PEOPLE HAVE A TRAGIC HISTORY OF REJECTING GOD'S LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR A PRAGMATIC, WORLDLY MODEL OF THEIR OWN CHOOSING

God goes on to warn them of the inherent dangers in concentrating power in one man without any checks and balances – **vs. 10-17**

(8:11-17) The High Cost of Leadership Abuse

1. **(:11a**) Government characterized by **Dominion** Rather than Servanthood
   "*This will be the procedure of the king who will reign over you*"

2. **(:11b-13**) Drafting people into positions of service to **benefit the king** (including military service)

3. (:**14-17a**) Taxation to support the administration of the leader
   Appropriation of Personal Property (land, animals, etc.)

4. (:**17b**) **Summary**: **Servitude** rather than Empowerment and Personal Liberty
   "*and you yourselves will become his servants*"

But the people persisted in their rebellion and their demand for a king and God acquiesced and we know how that model turned out for the nation. For the most part, there was one ungodly king after another and all sorts of problems.

What I want you to understand is that one man leadership – like that of Diotrephes – must be blamed not only on the individual who is pursuing his selfish ambition, but also on the people in general who are **enablers** of such a structure. He could not arise to such a position if the people did not allow it. But once such a structure is in place, the people can complain all they want and bring accusations of injustice and tyranny – but it is very hard to topple Yertle the Turtle.

When we get to **Christ's ministry on earth**, we find that He has to correct His own apostles when they display a similar desire for **preeminence**. Jesus had to warn them that His pattern for spiritual leadership was completely opposed to the pattern of the Gentile world. The mother of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, wanted her sons to be granted the most prominent positions in the coming kingdom – Look at the response of Jesus in **Matt. 20:25-28**

> *But Jesus called them to Himself, and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. [26] "It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, [27] and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; [28] just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."*

So the author of 2 John had an interesting background himself regarding pursuing selfish ambition long before he called out Diotrephes for his domineering leadership.

Isn't it interesting that when you get to the office of **deacon** in the first century church – an office that involves the humbling roll-up-your-sleeves service to others that is depicted in Jesus' washing the feet of His disciples, you don't find anyone clamoring to be the **Chief Deacon**. That is not even an issue that is raised.

So let's move on to the **situation in the first century church**. Surely in the decades so close to the ministry of Christ and the leadership provided by the apostles, you would expect the local churches to be set up and functioning in accordance with God's design. But that is not what we see. Look at the church at Corinth – all kinds of problems. Look at the churches Christ warns in the beginning chapters of the Book of Revelation – again, all sorts of problems. Look at the attacks that the Apostle Paul faces against his apostolic authority and ministry. Now we see the Apostle John coming under attack and slanderous accusations as well. Human nature has not changed. We naturally resist the authority of God.

I want to give you a **historical picture** of how one man leadership evolved in the early church. We have the writings of the church father Ignatius -- writing approximately AD 107–110 – just over a decade after the Apostle John. He is advocating for a differentiation in official leadership roles so that you would have **one bishop** elevated over a local church and then evolving from that you would have a bishop presiding over a number of churches in a geographic area. This was not a perversion that was limited to the congregation of Diotrephes. It was much more widespread.

Ignatius argues for a structure of one bishop (*episkopos)*, assisted by a body of presbyters/elders and deacons. So the bishop increasingly becomes the center of church unity, worship, and authority.

Smyrnaeans 8

> "*See that you all follow the bishop, even as Jesus Christ does the Father, and the presbytery as you would the apostles; and reverence the deacons, as being the institution of God*."

Magnesians 6

> "*The bishop presides in the place of God, while the presbyters in the place of the assembly of the apostles, along with the deacons…*"

Many other quotes from Ignatius could be provided to corroborate his position.
That is why I shy away from giving too much credence to the writings of the **Church Fathers**. They are so often wrong in specific doctrinal areas. I think this is God's way of setting apart the Scriptures as so uniquely authoritative. The other writings of the early church just do not compare.

Now let me be clear that just because you have leadership focused in one individual, that does not by necessity create a domineering and toxic situation. But it does make it much easier for such an abuse to develop.

If the biblical model is so clear, Why is the model not more widely practiced? How many of you have been members of churches led by a plurality of elders without a Senior Pastor designation or a Special Leader designation? Where do we see the success and the prevalence of the model?

Certainly we have seen a major change in the past 50 years in terms of embracing theoretically the true teaching about church governance. But that has not translated to a corresponding change in leadership behavior.

In my view, we have continued the **one-man emphasis** by modifying the practice of leadership to emphasize the **senior pastor model**. Here you have associate pastors or assistant pastors along with other elders who are not at the same functioning level or level of respect or authority as the senior pastor. This view is defended by Dr John MacArthur is his booklet: "Answering the Key Questions about Elder" – I love him … I am using his study bible … but he is dangerously wrong on this position. Let me walk you thru his approach.

> "*Proper biblical government by elders does strengthen the church, and the biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of God-ordained elders. Furthermore, it is the only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a local assembly ruled by majority opinion, or by one pastor*." Agreed

He goes so far as to say that "**one-man leadership is characteristic of cults, not of the church**."
[Review the Table of Contents]
But having properly defined the role and function of elders in all of these different areas, before he concludes he can't help himself. He has to try to **defend the practice** of having a special leader – a senior pastor or leader among leaders. This undermines everything he has said previously. He is desperate to find some type of Biblical support for this position – He asks the key question: "*Does government by elders eliminate the role of a special leader*?"

- He tries to argue on the basis of diversity – but that is a straw man; Nobody denies that different elders will have different gifts and that some will function more in an up-front platform role than others.

- Then he argues on the basis of the different lists of Apostles presented in the NT that the first person mentioned in each list was somehow the leader of that group – not because of official appointment but because of their influence. So there was always one individual that stood out as a "*leader among leaders*." That would be difficult to prove and has no relevance anyway. For example he writes: "*Peter and John are the two main characters in the first twelve chapters of Acts. Yet there is no record that John ever preached a single sermon. Again, Peter did all the talking?*" Really?? His conclusion: So obviously each church should have a special leader differentiated from the other elders.

His scriptural arguments are embarrassing for a man of his exegetical stature. He concludes this section by emphasizing that this special leader still should never function as a Diotrephes.
But where are the checks and balances to prevent this? He has undermined the biblical teaching of plurality of elders.

I wrote a lengthy position paper to refute his line of argumentation – I reference it along with my other studies of leadership for those of you who want to dig deeper on the subject:

https://www.bibleoutlines.com/leadership-studies/

ORDINATION OF ELDERS

RECOGNIZING THE SPIRIT OF DIOTREPHES

SAFEGUARDS AGAINST AUTHORITATIVE SHEPHERDING

INTEGRITY STILL MATTERS

ANALYSIS: SENIOR PASTOR MODEL VS. NO SENIOR PASTOR DESIGNATED

THE SNARE OF HIERARCHICAL HUMAN LEADERSHIP – THE KING COMPLEX – JUDGES 8:22-35

LORDING IT OVER THE SHEEP – THE ABIMELECH/DIOTREPHES MODEL OF LEADERSHIP – JUDGES 9:1-21

SECRET TO SUCCESSFUL SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP – 1 Samuel 7:3-17

THE SUPERSTAR SYNDROME IN SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP – 1 Samuel 8:1-22

SELF-RELIANCE CONDEMNED IN 2 CONTRASTING LEADERSHIP MODELS – Isaiah 22:15-25

CONDEMNATION OF SELF SERVING LEADERSHIP – Isaiah 56:9-12

WHAT TYPE OF LEADERSHIP IMPRESSES THE LORD – Jer. 22:13-17

FALSE PROPHETS DENOUNCED – JER. 23

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP MATERIALS – JOHN PIPER

My views are nothing new to me. All of these articles are over 20 years old. I did not develop them for this class this morning. I have studied and lived this doctrine of **biblical eldership** for 50 years. I would consider myself a **subject matter expert**. And yet I am not given much respect or much of a hearing because the actual **biblical implementation** is quite **unpopular** – especially among Senior Pastors and among our current ecclesiastical institutions like seminaries. They are designed to prepare men for paid formal roles as Senior Pastor or Associate Pastor, etc. They follow the traditional path of men applying from the outside for professional roles and being evaluated by a Search Committee. That places too much weight on their speaking ability. Rather than recognizing whom the Holy Spirit has raised up from the congregation by virtue of character and demonstrated giftedness and ministry experience from within. Is it no surprise that too often you end up with a **Hired Gun** rather than a true servant who would lay down his life for the sheep? The mentality is often: offer me an attractive enough financial package and I will assume the position rather than first commit to ministry irregardless of whether any compensation follows.

So if the Senior Pastor model did not develop and perpetuate itself on the basis of scriptural evidence, why is it so prevalent? [To be clear: our model at Grace Bible Baptist is not even the Senior Pastor model. It is closer to the one bishop model since we don't have elders.] The

answer is not surprising. You can come up with very powerful natural arguments to justify such a unique and special role.

The key question is whether the Senior Pastor should function as first among equals, a uniquely authoritative leader among the elders, or the chief executive who directs the elders and church staff. These are **different models**, and advocates do not all mean the same thing when they speak of a **Senior Pastor distinction**. Please understand that I am not saying that a Senior Pastor is necessarily a Diotrephes type of person. But I am saying that you are compromising the checks and balances of the biblical model. Here are some of the arguments:

- A church needs a recognized leader who can articulate its vision, establish priorities, and keep the congregation moving in a common direction. You need one person to provide the **overall Vision**. Every corporation functions this way. Too many cooks lead to unnecessary problems and complications.
- You will never get anything done if you do not have one person at the top of the hierarchical structure. The church needs someone who can make timely decisions. You need clear lines of accountability and responsibility.
- You need one person to provide **doctrinal clarity** and maintain the **unity** of the assembly. Teaching must be systematic and focused around the person with the greatest giftedness.
- How can so many churches be wrong? **We have always done things this way**. Our constitution mandates that we function this way.

Who evaluates and corrects the Senior Pastor if he becomes domineering, doctrinally unsound, or morally disqualified? Apparently Gaius and Demetrius were mature and godly men in the assembly … and yet the Apostle John does not expect them to be able to correct the situation. Diotrephes simply has too much power.

But this just proves that God's thoughts are not man's thoughts. Expediency and rationalization are no substitute for **biblical conviction** when it comes to structuring church leadership.

So what about a church situation where you don't have the biblical form of government but now you discover what the bible has to say on the subject. How can you resist making the change immediately to conform to what Jesus has required?

- You could argue "What's the big deal. We have always functioned this way and God has blessed. It's only semantics anyway. Besides, Change could bring some unwanted chaos."
- You could argue "We are just following our church constitution"
- You could argue "We will head that direction some time in the future"

What about what I tell my 3 year old grandson: **Obey right away**! Doesn't that apply to churches as well? Think of other types of situations. What about if you have female pastors and then you find out that the Scriptures teach that pastors should only be men? What would you do?

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.*

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 hate any message like mine this morning that exposes him

- 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 angrily and defensively when they feel that respect is not forthcoming. (**Philippians 2:3-5**)

- 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 same 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 other independent situation where they can end up as the chief shepherd and the primary preacher.

- 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. He might claim that he does not always get his way – but he always gets his way when he wants to. He 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 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.

- 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 hear phrases like "Don't touch God's anointed." 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 views himself as making great sacrifices for the work of the Lord. His wife will usually have this perspective of sacrifice as well. He does work 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. He has created the unique pressures that he now appeals to as a victim.

- 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 himself.

- 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. 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 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**).

- 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 look like a **Taskmaster**:
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**?
May our desire be that He alone have the preeminence!