

Influencing God's People

A study of the apostle John's third letter

Years ago I used to think that the first Christian churches were ideal, nearly perfect, and that through the years these became more and more corrupt. It is true that there has been decadence. The close bond between church and state, which begun with the victory of Constantine back in 312, made Christianity more respectable, wealthy and politically powerful, but compromised its true Christian character. The sequence of Church councils testifies to the struggle against heresy. But serious problems were also present in the first Christian churches. The book of Acts and the corrective elements within the apostolic letters show that these churches also lived difficult moments, they also had their share of complicated brothers and sisters, heated doctrinal controversies, divisionists, infiltrated unbelievers and discouraged deserters. The early local churches were definitely not ideal! In fact, the Christian church has been designed to function, to grow and to flourish in a fallen world! In this short letter, the apostle John seeks to encourage a close friend of his, "beloved Gaius," who is living frustrating and painful times in his local church.

Three persons are mentioned by name in this letter, Gaius, Diotrephes and Demetrius. The attitude of these three men influenced those around them. Their behaviour had an impact on the spreading of God's word and the wellbeing of fellow believers. What influence do you have on others? Does your example encourage a worldly or a Godly version of Christianity? How are you perceived in your local church? Are you seen as a difficult person, a problem maker, or as an encourager, a problem solver? Are you only a receiver or also a giver? Do your comments strengthen or dishearten those who are trying to serve the Lord? Your attitude and behaviour has an impact on the lives your fellow believers. So does mine.

1. Gaius – a generous helper encourages God's people (Verses 1-8)

Outside this letter, we find four other references to Gaius. We know that the apostle Paul baptized a Gaius (1 Cor. 1:14), that a Gaius was one of Paul's travelling companions (Acts 19:29; 20:4), and we read of a generous Gaius, "whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy" (Rom.16:23). These references to Gaius may describe the same person, but since Gaius was a common name, this may be unlikely. But John's third letter does tell us some interesting things about one particular Gaius.

(a) His soul prospered: “Dear friend, I pray that you may enjoy good health and that all may go well with you, even as your soul is getting along well” (v.2). The apostle John had listened to reports of the good Gaius was doing, and his faithfulness to the truth (vv.3-6). To John this was evidence that Gaius’ soul was in a good condition. His physical health, however, was a matter of concern, and John said he was praying about that. This scripture corrects those who teach that sickness is always a result of sin or lack of faith. In Gaius we see a man whose spiritual condition was good, and yet his physical condition was not good.

(b) He walked in the truth: “It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth” (vv.3-4). To practice the truth you must first know it. The evidence of new birth is not Bible knowledge but a new life, a different way of living. This walking is made evident by the way we treat our partner, how we manage our finances, what we do with our free time, how we talk about other people, and so on.

(c) He served his brothers: “Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love...” (vv.5-8). There is no evidence in this letter to suggest that Gaius was a preacher or a Bible teacher or a talented musician. And yet he encouraged God’s people. We see that he is generous in serving others. He opens his home to fellow believers, he provides for the needs of travelling ministers and evangelists. In supporting others, he worked “together for the truth” (v.8).

Much damage is done to the cause of Christ when saints insist on using a gift they do not possess. Of course, it is true that we should try new areas of ministry and that every gift needs development, but the Body of Christ works best when each one of us does well and faithfully what we are gifted to do. Although Gaius was a generous man, John prefers to call him “faithful” (v.5). He was faithful to God, recognizing that he was only an administrator of his material possessions. He was also faithful to God’s servants, teachers and evangelists, knowing that, “the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel” (1 Cor. 9:14).

2. Diotrophes – a self-centered believer polarizes God’s people (Verses 9-10)

We don’t find Diotrophes elsewhere in Scripture. Perhaps that is a good thing! Christian assemblies suffer when they have a brother or a sister with some of Diotrophes’ attitudes. All we know about this man is contained in verses 9 and 10, and they make very sad reading. Maybe Diotrophes knew the Scriptures. Perhaps he was a good teacher. He was definitely not detached neither lazy, since he took seriously the activities of his local church. But in his heart there is a serious problem: he “loves to be first” (v.9). Do you sometimes think you are a little more important than your fellow brothers and sisters?... that your suggestion or interpretation should be imposed on all? The theology of a Diotrophes-type person may be conservative or it may be liberal. Although such may use the Bible to defend their behaviour, their problem lies in their heart. Those who love to be first find it difficult to enjoy the gifts and service of others, unless they are in control of the project or event. They perceive the ministry of others as a treat to their own position, as competition rather than a blessing.

When it comes to taking decisions, people like Diotrophes ask “how does this affect me” rather than how does this affect Christ or the work of God. Under the cloak of concern, such gossip maliciously over fellow Christians (v.10). They promote exclusive little networks, refusing fellowship with some and threatening to put out of the church those who find it difficult to agree (v.10). How do you treat your fellow brothers and sisters? When you suspect

a defective teaching or uncharitable behaviour, do you speak to the person concerned or to others about that person? Can you accept the possibility that you may be wrong or that there may be two equally valid ways of looking at that Scripture? Remember that even when you hold the truth, you can walk in error - if you let your flesh express itself. As John the Baptist, we should constantly remind ourselves, "He must become greater; I must become less (Jn. 3:30).

3. Demetrius – a good example inspires God’s people (Verses 11-14)

We read of a Demetrius who lived in Ephesus. He was a silversmith "who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought in no little business for the craftsmen." In fact, he was something like the president of the craftsmen’s union (Acts 29:24, 38). Could it be that this Demetrius became a Christian and was now carrying John’s letter to Gaius? If this Demetrius, a creative-business-leadership type person, actually formed part of the congregation where Diotrefes ruled, he must have found it very difficult! Perhaps John endorses Demetrius in this letter because he was a good man that was also being discredited by Diotrefes. These are interesting possibilities but they remain speculations. The facts about this man are contained in one verse, and what a lovely description: "Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone - and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true" (v.12).

Demetrius’ way of living provided a good model for others to follow. Not only did others admire and speak well of him, but his behaviour was in agreement with the truth. Sometimes, in some situations, we may be called to choose between being in harmony with people and acting in harmony with God’s revealed truth. But normally, a life consecrated to the Lord and to serving His people becomes an inspiration to God’s people. Of course our goal is to look at Jesus and follow Him. But on the way we may also benefit from the Godly examples of other men and women, those who are still living and those who have gone before us. They will not be perfect, but God can use their passionate lives to break us out of our self-centered religious existence. Their example can inspire us to take another step of faith. Thinking about examples, have you considered what kind of example you provide? If all were as Biblical, spiritual, committed and enthusiastic about Jesus as you, what would your local church look like? May the Lord help us live our Christian life in such a way that it may motivate and inspire those who know us.

Conclusion

We have seen that the lives of Gaius, Diotrefes and Demetrius had an impact on those who knew them, met them and heard about them. You and I influence others. Do you seek to encourage, support and serve others? Does God’s truth speak well of you? In what direction does my life motivate others? The apostle Paul could write, "Join with others in following my example, brothers, and take note of those who live according to the pattern we gave you" (Phil. 3:17). What are your plans for today and tomorrow? May the Lord give us the grace to live them well!

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January 2009

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