

merely a suggestion by John, but is cast in the mode of an obligation. When he writes “we ought to support...,” the Greek *ἡμεῖς οὖν ὀφείλομεν* would indicate something closer to “we are obligated to support...”

...that we may be fellow workers for the truth. – When the believing community supports those who voluntarily labor in their midst, they too are giving glory to God through their obedience to His commandments and thus join the teachers and leaders as workers for the truth.

This is an important truth that has been lost or at least diminished among a large part of the wider “Christian Church” in our times. For the work of making disciples, teaching others, evangelizing the lost, etc. is not to be envisioned as in the hands of a few teachers or leaders, but is that to which every believer in the community is to be connected. “Fellow workers” (*συνεργοὶ, sunergoi*) means that all combine their abilities and their means in order to accomplish the task. This means engaging in prayer, encouragement, putting hands to particular tasks, sharing that which is needed for the success of the whole, etc.

And what is the ultimate goal of being fellow workers together? It is that the truth of Yeshua as our Lord, Savior, and King, might be made known to a watching world, portraying the riches of salvation He has procured for all who will believe. Rather than being spectators in the community, John exhorts us all to see ourselves as “fellow workers for the truth.”

### 9 I wrote something to the *ekklesia*; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.

The opening line, “I wrote something to the *ekklesia*,” has gathered a number of variants in the Greek manuscripts. While the translation as given here has the greater weight of evidence for being authentic, other variant readings would yield “I would have written something to the *ekklesia*,” “I wrote to the *ekklesia* herself,” and “I wrote unto the *ekklesia*.”<sup>1</sup>

Given the manuscript evidence for the text being “I wrote something to the *ekklesia*,” it is clear that John is referring to a written com-

1 ἔγραψά τι,  $\aleph^*$  A (B) 048 1241 1739 (cop<sup>sa, bo</sup>) arm; ἔγραψα ἄν (“I would have written ...”) was introduced into  $\aleph^c$  33 81 181 614 vg *al.*; those omitting τι (C K L P  $\Psi$  most minuscules, followed by the Textus Receptus); the readings ἔγραψάς τι (B cop<sup>sa, bo</sup>) and ἔγραψα αὐτῇ (326<sup>c</sup>) are obviously transcriptional errors. [Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament*, 2nd edition (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), p. 655.]

munication that he had previously sent to the assembly (*ekklesia*) in which Diotrephes held some position of leadership and authority. It is also evident that word got back to John that his letter had not been heeded and, in fact, John's admonitions and instructions had been rejected by Diotrephes.

We are left with the question of what John wrote in this letter to which he refers. Some have suggested that John is referring to 2John but the content of that epistle does not seem to match with John's concerns in our text, i.e., the need to accept "the brothers" who would come with "the teaching" of the Apostles. It seems best to conclude that the letter sent to the assembly in which Diotrephes was a leader, was lost or perhaps even hidden or destroyed by Diotrephes. This is doubtlessly the reason for the variants on this verse that have entered into the manuscripts, for scribes did not want a letter of the Apostle to have been lost and therefore unable to be received into the canon of Scripture. But we know that all the writings which God intended to be preserved as sacred Scripture have been so preserved, and that the Apostles who were the authors of the Apostolic Scriptures doubtlessly wrote other things which were never intended to be used universally by the Lord as inspired Scripture. Though we do not know the exact content of the letter, we do know that it had not achieved John's intended purpose for sending it. Rather than submitting to the authority of the last Apostle, Diotrephes, and apparently the assembly to which he belonged, rejected John's admonition and teaching.

*but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.* – The Greek phrase which John uses to describe Diotrephes is *ὁ φιλοπρωτεύων αὐτῶ*, "who likes to put himself first." This phrase might well suggest that Diotrephes was a "self-promoted demagogue,"<sup>1</sup> that is, instead of accepting his position of leadership as one leader teamed together with others, all having equal authority, he put himself forward as the primary authority within that assembly of believers, requiring the other leaders to submit to him. Added to this was the fact, which John makes explicit in our verse, that Diotrephes likewise rejected the authority of the Apostles and of John in particular.

Though the Apostolic Scriptures were yet to be completely gathered and recognized as a canon of Scripture having equal authority with the canon of the Tanach, the Apostles were recognized as having been given authority directly from Yeshua, and by the time John was writing his epistles, Paul's letters were already being received as having the authority of Scripture. Note Peter's words in his second epistle, in which

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1 F. F. Bruce, *3John*, p. 152.

he parallels the writings of Paul with that of the received Scriptures:

Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless, and regard the patience of our Lord as salvation; just as also our beloved brother Paul, according to the wisdom given him, wrote to you, as also in all his letters, speaking in them of these things, in which are some things hard to understand, which the untaught and unstable distort, as they do also the rest of the Scriptures, to their own destruction. (2Pet 3:14–16)

Thus, John writes regarding Diotrephes, that he “does not accept what we say,” which is more accurately translated as “does not accept us” (οὐκ ἐπιδέχεται ἡμᾶς). In using the plural “does not accept us,” John seems clearly to be referring to the Apostles as a group who were commissioned by Yeshua Himself to continue the building of His *ekklesia* as He had instructed. This must surely be what Paul means when he writes regarding the ingrafted Gentile believers:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints, and are of God’s household, having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Messiah Yeshua Himself being the corner stone....” (Eph 2:19–20)

When John characterizes Diotrephes as a self-appointed leader who refused to accept the authority of the Apostles, we see the early roots of an anti *sola scriptura* perspective, that is, regarding the authority of men as primary and putting the authority of Scripture as secondary. For the Apostles were commissioned to write the Apostolic Scriptures by Yeshua Himself, and to refuse to accept them as did Diotrephes is likewise to dismiss the authority of the Scriptures which they wrote.

But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you. (Jn 14:26)

Here in our text, through the example of Diotrephes, we see the structure of the *ekklesia* which was sent forth by the Apostles of Yeshua, beginning to be hijacked by men who were setting themselves up as the ultimate authority within a local community of believers. In fact, when one looks at the history of the Christian Church as it emerged in the 2nd through 6th Centuries CE, it is clear that the pattern for leadership

set forth by the Apostles had been set aside and replaced by a hierarchy of leaders, with individual Bishops having regional authority over local Bishops, and the head Bishop having authority over the regional Bishops. This finally resulted in the emergence of the Pope in the Roman Catholic Church who was said to govern the “church” wherever it convened.

But what was the pattern set forth by the Apostles for leaders within the *ekklesia* of Yeshua in order to fulfill their duties as shepherds and teachers as well as to care for the physical needs of those within the community? The primary terms used to designate leaders in the early assemblies of The Way were “elder” (πρεσβύτερος, *presbuteros*), overseer (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*), and deacon (διάκονος, *diakonos*).

Many would consider both “elder” and “overseer” to designate a single office, since there are no specific qualifications for an “elder” given in the Apostolic Scriptures, yet the word “elder” is clearly used of leaders within local communities. Further, since there are specific qualifications for overseers (1Tim 3:1–7; Tit 1:5–9) as well as deacons (1Tim 3:8–13), it seems possible that since the term “elder” was commonly used to designate leaders in the synagogues as well as throughout the history of Israel, it was a general term that could refer both to overseers and deacons in their leadership roles.

But the issue which I want to emphasize from our text is that Diotrophes had put himself up as the primary authority within the community of believers, something that goes contrary to the Apostolic teaching, for everywhere in the Apostolic Scriptures where we find leaders mentioned within a given local community of believers (an *ekklesia*), the terms “elder,” “overseer,” and “deacon” are always in the plural. Note the following examples:

When they had appointed elders for them in every *ekklesia*, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. (Acts 14:23)

And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. (Acts 15:2)

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the *ekklesia*. (Acts 20:17)

Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Messiah Yeshua, to all the saints in Messiah Yeshua who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons: (Phil 1:1)

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, (Titus 1:5)

Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the *ekklesia* and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; (James 5:14)

You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. (1Pet 5:5)

We see, then, that the practice of having a single “Pastor” or “Overseer” in each local assembly of believers finds no support in the Apostolic Scriptures. Rather, the pattern set forth by the Apostles is one of a plurality of Overseers or Elders whose primary duty was to guard the assembly from false teaching and to “shepherd the *ekklesia of God* which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28) by teaching the assembly the truth of the Scriptures and helping them apply it to their lives.

Likewise, the pattern for deacons is that there should be a plurality, working together with the Overseers, to care for the physical needs of people within the community.

We see then, that Diotrephes stands as a very early example of someone who sought to overturn the Apostolic teaching regarding leadership within the *ekklesia*, and who likewise tried to dismiss the authority of the Apostles themselves. And we should note that John considers the situation with Diotrephes as requiring public rebuke as well as a clear warning not to be persuaded by his errant teaching. While we must do so with caution and wisdom, we too must point out those who are teaching a message contrary to the Scriptures, and warn each other not to be ensnared by those who pedal man’s own ideas as though they were God’s or who twist the Scriptures to fit their own agendas.

**10 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, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the *ekklesia* (assembly).**

As noted above, it seems most likely that the letter John addressed to Diotrephes and the community of which he was a leader, was not the same assembly in which Gaius fellowshiped. However, John is

concerned that there may be those within the community in which Gaius was one of the leaders, who might be persuaded by the errant position and teaching of Diotrephes. John therefore makes it clear that he intends to confront Diotrephes in order to show that his teaching and rejection of the Apostles' authority is a grave danger and must not be followed.

John is planning to come to the community in which Gaius is a leader, but the Greek construction (ἐάν ἔλθω, "if I come")<sup>1</sup> would indicate that he was not yet giving an exact time when he planned to come. But when he does come, he intends to "call attention to his deeds." Here we have a public critique and challenge to the errant teaching and actions of Diotrephes, and John details the necessity for such measures, namely, "For this reason" (διὰ τοῦτο). The reason is summed up in three issues: Diotrephes has (1) committed *leshon hara*, "evil speech" or gossip against the Apostles, and done so using "wicked words." (2) He has also refused to accept those who come to the community with commendation of the Apostles, and (3) he has dismissed from the community those who have opened their homes to fellow believers who came with the approval of the Apostles.

It would appear that the reason Diotrephes was slandering John and the Apostles was because he resented the authority of the Apostles, and perhaps John's apostolic authority in particular. Though in this epistle John does not indicate that Diotrephes was involved in heresy, it seems at least possible that his unwillingness to submit to Apostolic authority may have related to teachings of the Apostles with which he differed. Once again, the issue that our text brings to the forefront is that of the final authority for matters of our faith: what we believe and practice.

John describes Diotrephes as "unjustly accusing us with wicked words" (ποιεῖ λόγοις πονηροῖς φλυαρῶν ἡμᾶς). The Greek word the NASB translates as "accusing" (φλυαρῶν < φλυαρέω) is used only here in the Apostolic Scriptures. Its related noun, φλύαρος (*phluaros*) is found one time, in 1Tim 3:15, with the meaning "gossips." The word group itself can carry the meaning of "gossip" or "slander," but it can also carry the idea of "nonsense" or "babbling." This is what John is stating regarding Diotrephes: he is speaking slander against John and the Apostles, as well as against the believers and communities that receive John and the Apostles, but such evil words have no substance—they are mere

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1 ἐάν + subjunctive or optative mood marks a 3rd class conditional clause, which sees the fulfillment of the condition as yet future. See Blass & DeBrunner, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament* (Univ of Chicago, 1961), §373.

nonsense or babbling.

...and not satisfied with this, he himself does not receive the brethren, either, and he forbids those who desire to do so and puts them out of the *ekklesia* (assembly). Here we see the common characteristics of a cult. A single leader takes to himself a position of ultimate authority and goes about seeking to undermine the established authorities through slander and gossip. Then, in order to maintain his following, he forbids any contrary voices to join his group, and excommunicates those within his group who might be willing to receive those whom the leader considers “outsiders.” The common elements are all clustered around the leader’s need to rule the lives of others by requiring them to accept his teaching and to dismiss all others as unworthy and even dangerous.

Here we have another clear indication that Diotrephes is acting as the sole authority in the community he leads. People are dismissed from the community by his word, not by the agreed upon position of multiple overseers. Already in the late 1st Century, the Apostolic pattern of leadership within the local *ekklesia* has, in this instance, given way to a single authority model, who has taken to himself the authority that ultimately belongs to Yeshua as the head of the *ekklesia*.

And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the *ekklesia*....” (Eph 1:22)

He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything. (Col 1:18)

God’s way is to make His inspired word the final authority in all matters of faith and how we live out our faith. This is why it is vital that we know the Scriptures and are able to align all teaching against its “straight edge of truth.” The value of being part of a community which holds the word of God to be their final authority is likewise important, for it is within the context of community that the full radius of biblical truth can be discussed and thereby made applicable to the lives of each individual.

**11 Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good. Anyone who does what is good is from God. Anyone who does what is evil has not seen God.**

This is now the fourth time in this short epistle that John uses “Dear friend” (*ἀγαπητέ, agapēte*) in reference to Gaius, having addressed him directly three times with this endearing term. The wisdom of the elder